AGING, PUBLIC POLICY AND GOVERNANCE: UNPACKING THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF A COMPLEX POLICY ISSUE

**DRAFT** (please do not cite)

ABSTRACT: Across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, populations aged 65 years and over have dramatically increased in the past three decades, both in size and as a percentage of total population. This fact of demographic change is pressing societies to respond and herein we see policy reforms in such areas as pensions, retirement, healthcare and caregiving. In this, ideational constructions and the discourses that carry change are important. In public policy, the dominance of certain perspectives over others is critical to the types of policies that are adopted. This research examines this dynamic—the interplay between disciplinary discourses, expert knowledge and aging policy. Employing discursive institutionalism, it considers: the role of ideas in prioritizing and privileging certain policy responses over others; how are ideas constituted into discourse and policy actions; where and among whom influencing discourse takes place; and how ideas and discourse drive policy (and institutional) change. This work is grounded in a review of the United Nations’ Madrid framework, which calls for a ‘society of all ages’ and Canadian responses.

INTRODUCTION

“Claims that the welfare state is in a hopeless crisis have come and gone with amazing regularity over the past half-century” (Epsing Anderson 2009: 145).

These claims ring anew—provoked by the widespread phenomenon of population aging. Remarkable gains in life expectancy over the past 50 years across OECD countries raise the question of how societies and the social welfare state will adapt (Polivka 2011). There are many unknowns. Such shifts challenge contemporary understandings of labour market attachment, retirement, familial roles, government spending, pensions and so on. Understanding the impacts and consequences of population aging is a multi disciplinary effort, encompassing a focus on the processes of ageing itself, as well as societal impacts and the application of this knowledge to the structure of policies and programs. Across these domains, various disciplines ‘problematize’ ageing in very different ways. Writing in 1987, McDaniel notes that population aging has largely been defined as a ‘problem paradigm’—one that has heavily influenced public policy discussions. She describes this

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2 On average, life expectancy at birth across OECD countries is now 80 year of age; Canada is slightly above the OECD average at 81 years of age (OECD 2012).
The process of ‘paradigm making’ as involving an evolving social consensus between academia, policy makers and the media wherein the problem oriented frame comes to dominate and “take on a reality of [its] own after a time, whether or not [it] ha[s] any solid basis in reality initially” (McDaniel 1987: 331). This ‘problem-oriented frame’ has been formative in arguments around demographic determinism (apocalyptic demography). Political economy of aging literature draws attention to the discursive and institutional constructions that propel certain forms of action and how they change over time (Biggs & Powell 2001; Polivka 2011; Polivka & Longino 2002), such as the tensions between a “deserving model” and a “public burden model” of aging (Walker 2009: 79). My research follows from this framework of thinking.

My research examines the interplay between disciplinary discourses, expert knowledge and aging policy. Employing discursive institutionalism, it considers: the role of ideas in prioritizing and privileging certain policy responses over others; how are ideas constituted into discourse and policy actions; where and among whom influencing discourse takes place; and how ideas and discourse drive policy (and institutional) change. This work is grounded in an examination of the United Nation’s frameworks on aging and their call for a ‘society of all ages’. The discourses and policy actions proposed in this international framework are compared and contrasted against Canadian responses to aging policy. The doing so, the two are found to be a study in contrasts—with the United Nation’s framework employing a positive aging framework and national Canadian employing a largely negative one—characterizing societal aging as an economic threat. This work is part of a larger comparative review of national policies for aging societies across five federal states (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany and Australia).

This paper first introduces discursive institutionalism and corresponding research methods followed by a high level review of the disciplinary treatment of aging. This is followed by a discussion of aging policy at the international scale and the structure of Canadian responses. These responses are then contrasted and conclusions (and recommendations for further study) are offered.

I. DISCOURSE INSTITUTIONALISM AND RESEARCH METHODS

This research is informed by the newest of the institutionalisms—discursive institutionalism (DI). Discourse analysis, as a general field, stems from different traditions and is methodologically diverse depending on the way in which ‘discourse’ is interpreted; linguistic traditions emphasize analysis of written language while others open it up to social norms and cultural practices (Hewitt 2009: 2). Hajer defines discourse as “an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices” (1995: 44). Applied to public policy, discourse analysis subjects policy analysis and formation to critical interpretations and challenges the notion of ‘rational’ policy making. Writers such as Foucault, who emphasis the role of power relations within the construction of knowledge (and public policy), usefully call attention to the discursive frames that guide policy action and how these are embedded and reinforced through institutional practices. Ideas and discourse are evident in sociological and (to a lesser extent) historical approaches to institutionalism. However, DI places them at the forefront
of analysis; ideas are understood as the content of discourse analysis, while discourse is
the interactive process of conveying ideas. Like historical institutionalism, DI sees
historical processes as critical to the development of institutions.

Schmidt’s writings on DI outline this approach (2008, 2009, 2011). Her recent
writings on the subject pull together the literature on ideas and discourse into a cohesive
umbrella concept. She describes ideas as being constituted by policies, programmes and
philosophies of which there are cognitive and normative varieties. Policies are the
policies and solutions proposed by decision makers. Programmes underpin policy ideas
and are more general in scope—“they define the problems to be solved by such policies;
the issues to be considered; the goals to be achieved; the norms, methods, and
instruments to be applied; and the ideals that frame the more immediate policy ideas
proposed to solve any given problem” (Schmidt 2008: 306). Programmes operate at the
level of policy cores and provide justification for action—therefore programmatic ideas
are related to how a policy problem is conceptualized and problematised. Philosophies
are more general still, they encompass public sentiments, deep core beliefs and
worldviews and as such, as less changeable and are “are rarely contested except in times
‘policy’, ‘programme’ and ‘philosophy’ ideas by cognitive and normative type. Cognitive
ideas examine: “how (first level) policies offer solutions to problems; how (second level)
programmes define the problems to be solved and the methods to solve them, and how
both policies and programmes mesh with a deeper core of (third level) principles and
norms of scientific disciplines or technical practices” (2008: 307). Normative ideas, on
the other hand, attach values to policy actions and political debates.

Overall, DI scholarship explores why some ideas become adopted as policies,
while others do not (Schmidt 2008: 307). It therefore looks at both positive and negative
cases and considers alternative policy approaches. Policies that have been realized are not
by virtue of that fact treated as defacto ‘successful’ insomuch as policies that haven’t
been adopted are treated as failures. Instead, the process by which some policies gain
traction over others becomes an object of study.

In terms of policy changes, individual policy ideas are more easily changeable
than that of policy programmes, while public philosophies are the least changeable of
both. Changes in programmatic ideas can be thought of as paradigmatic shifts—such as
that described by Peter Hall (1989) in the shift from Keynesianism to monetarism in
Britain in the 1980s. Delineating between these three types of ideas provides a distinction
around the nature of the changes that are being felt and the scope of their effects. As
Schmidt points out, ideas and discourse cannot always explain change—sometimes actors
act without articulating the ideas behind their actions. However, once change occurs,
actors do “develop ideas about what happened and what they did, which forms the basis
of their expectations of change, whether crisis driven or incremental” (Schmidt 2011:
108). Philosophical ideas are deeper and longer lasting—they are “broad concepts tied to
values and moral principles” (Wier 1992: 169 quoted in Schmidt 2011: 111). These can
be thought of as public philosophies, sentiments, worldviews or frames of reference. As
with the switch to monetarism and neoliberalism, programmatic ideas can be difficult to
separate from public philosophies (e.g., wherein the preeminence of the competitive
market as an organizing force in society has come to dominate).
While Schmidt’s writings usefully delineate between ideas and discourse, they do not propose a methodology as such. This is a common critique of discourse analysis more generally (and not just DI variants). The scope, scale and temporality of discourse analysis can make projects unwieldy and large. Consider for example Flyvbjerg’s (2002) study of urban transportation planning that spans 15 years of history and weaves a complex narrative of how policies are constructed, debated and acted upon. As Hewitt points out, the construction of such a study requires a long emersion in the policy field and considers a vast amount of data (2009: 10). Structured approaches can help overcome some of these ‘scope’ issues (Hewitt 2009). There is a wide body of scholarship that provides guidance on methods for discourse analysis (see for example, van den Brink & Metze 2006; Chilton 2004; Howarth 2000). Hajer (2006) prescribes a series of steps that can be used to construct narrative wherein ‘helicopter’ and key stakeholder interviews are critical to the processes of verification and reflexivity.

This study focuses on national responses to population aging. In particular, it considers how the United Nation’s strategies on populating aging and their calls for a ‘society of all ages’ have been acted upon by governments. It looks at Canada’s strategies on aging as articulated in government policy documents as well as associated policy and governance networks—as such, this work pursues understanding a breadth of responses, as opposed to detail within each case. Further, the discourses are those found in official documents. How different countries conceptualize and act on population aging reveals alternative policy approaches—it shows both what is possible and how this is accomplished and in doing so provides a framework with which to understand the path that certain countries have taken in problematizing and acting on this issue.

II) THE DISCIPLINARY TREATMENT OF POPULATION AGING
A recent article on population aging in The Economist magazine titled “Age Invaders” leads with the oft-familiar demographic statistics that paint a shocking picture—the number of people over 65 will double in just 25 years. By 2035, 13% of the population will be above the age of 65 (presently this figure stands at 8%) (ibid.). Further, the old age dependency ratio—the ratio of those in old age to those of working age—will grow even faster over this term as a result of declining birthrates: from 16 people aged 65 and over for every 100 adults between the ages of 25 and 64, to a figure of 26 by the year 2035 (ibid.). There are of course great variations by state and region within these trends. For Japan (an extreme case), this same ratio is estimated to be 69/100 in 2035 (up from 43/100 in 2010). The culmination of these figures ends with the statement that these shifts are “more than enough to reshape the world economy” (ibid.). It is perhaps unsurprising that such figures accompany descriptions of aging as ‘the grey tsunami’. This genre of ‘apocalyptic demography’ views ‘demography as destiny’ and as a societal threat—one wherein there is little agency to change outcomes. Writing in 1987, McDaniel notes that population aging has largely been defined as a ‘problem paradigm’—with this type of ‘framing’ heavily influencing public policy discussions. She describes this process of ‘paradigm making’ as involving an evolving social consensus between academia, policy makers and the media wherein the problem oriented frame comes to dominate and “take on a reality of [its] own after a time, whether or not [it] ha[s] any solid basis in reality initially” (McDaniel 1987: 331). While such discourse remains
prevalent, particularly in the media, there have been widespread critiques of the ‘demography as destiny’ argument—for example, the work of Gee and Gutman (2000), which counters the notion of population aging as a severe social problem in the making.

Much about the impact of population aging on state, society and marketplace remains unknown. While ‘deterministic’ literature certainly remains, much scholarship across disciplines has turned its attention to exploring heterogeneity of aging and its effects. Understanding the impacts and consequences of population aging is a multi-disciplinary effort, encompassing a focus on the processes of ageing itself, as well as societal impacts and the application of this knowledge to the structure of policies and programs. Across these domains, various disciplines ‘problematize’ ageing in very different ways. Political economy of aging literature draws attention to the discursive and institutional constructions that propel certain forms of action and how they change over time (Biggs & Powell 2001; Polivka 2011; Polivka & Longino 2002). Such scholarship has turned its attention to exploring the nuances of the impacts and consequences of population aging stemming from the realization that these trends are neither uniform nor static—that older persons are not aging in the same ways as they have in the past and as a consequence, societal and public policy adaptation will likely be different. In other words, we cannot simply project out the status quo to understand future realities. Like all areas of very complex policy, the landscape is constantly shifting. While critical perspectives on population aging are increasingly apparent, there are important divisions across disciplines in terms of the questions that are asked and the ways in which they problematize population aging and its impacts.

In terms of economic literature, there are many instances of the ‘apocalyptic demography’ genre. This may because of its focus on forecasting economic change where future adjustments are unknown. However, much economic scholarship has moved on to consider the impact and consequences of population aging from a more heterogeneous perspective across such policy areas as pensions, labour market demand and health care expenditures and the viability of social welfare spending. Much of this work is focused on forecasting change using economic models—for example the work of Prettner (2011) on the impact of population aging on long run economic growth.

Sociological literature speaks to the implications of population aging for intergenerational relations and equity (e.g., Erikson & Goldthorpe 2002), and on the overall relationship between state, market and society (e.g., Arber & Attias-Donfut 2002; Dixon 2000). In doing so, it explores aging dynamics across multiple scales—from micro studies at the level of individuals and families and how they negotiate these spaces, to broader meso and macro level ones relating to, for example, shifts in the role of the social welfare state (e.g., Asquith 2009; Biggs & Powell 2001). Political science literature on population aging has significant cross over with sociological and economic approaches in many cases. However, it places a particular emphasis, unsurprisingly, on what aging means for political power, representation and transformation in public policy (e.g., Campbell 2002; Duncan & Reutter 2006).

Amongst the disciplines, gerontological approaches have been foremost in countering prevailing negatives narratives around population aging. Gerontology is a multidisciplinary field encompassing scholarship that advances understanding of how and why we age and how the aging process affects human and social arrangements (Ferraro
2013: 1). In a discussion of the field of gerontology, Ferraro refers to the ‘gerontological imagination’ (akin to the sociological imagination) in an effort to tie together the various components of the discipline. In doing so he stresses key elements of a gerontological conceptual framework. These are summarized as follows: i) aging is not a cause of all age related phenomenon (stressing that it’s important to remain skeptical of what factors can be attributed to age effects); ii) the process of aging itself is multidimensional, encompassing biological, social and psychological changes at individuals at varying rates; iii) genetics have a huge influence on aging (in terms of longevity, biological and behavioral processes across the life course), iv) age is positively associated with heterogeneity across a population (and that disadvantage accumulates over the lifecourse, differentiating a cohort over time); v) and finally, aging is a lifelong process, and it is therefore useful to use a lifecourse perspective to advance the study of aging (paraphrased from Ferraro 2013: 1-13). The gerontological perspective (or imagination, in the words of Ferarro), encompasses methodologically diverse scholarship—from qualitative to quantitative and ontological/epistemological divide therein. But as an approach we can see that it treats age as a complex and ever-changing category and doing so emphasizes heterogeneity over uniformity in contrast to the more static conceptions of age as deterministic and problematic.

III. THE ‘NESTEDNESS’ OF AGING POLICY: INTERNATIONAL CALLS TO INTEGRATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PLANNING
There has been a growing interest among academic and policy communities in how international organizations and their global networks influence public policy and government reform (Sidorenko and Walker 2004; Olshansky et. al, 2010). Within aging policy, the United Nations have been particularly active in raising awareness about demographic change and its implications for public policy. The UN has brought together considerable expertise on this topic from governments, the non-profit sector, academia and their own networks. These large-scale deliberative processes often take years to formulate and aim to forge consensus on approaches to development. As such, the ideas that they forward are important to pay attention to and have traction.

In 1982, the United Nations held the World Assembly on Ageing—bringing together considerable policy expertise. Following on this work, the UN adopted the Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing, which raised awareness about the widespread (but, by no means evenly felt) gains in longevity worldwide. This became the first international instrument on aging—it was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1982 and was adopted with the purpose of guiding thinking about older populations and the formulation of policies and programmes on aging. It offered broad guidelines and general principles to “meet the challenge of progressively aging societies,” while taking care to state that detailed policies would need to be nationally led, culturally specific and attuned to a country’s material capacities (UN 1982: #26).

The language used in the document is strong—the plan of action calls for no less than “a new economic order based on new international economic relations that are mutually beneficial and that will make possible a just and equitable utilization of the available wealth, resources and technology” (1982: #15). The 1982 Vienna Plan presented goals and policy recommendations (as opposed to binding agreements). The
language within these recommendations is telling; while there is a repeated emphasis on the inclusion of older persons in society and the need to recognize their contributions, there is also a strong language of dependency of the older population, and related to this, a need for protection (CARDI 2011). Concerns about dependency are particularly apparent in the recommendations on development (sections 33-48). Importantly, the Vienna Plan also called for economic and social planning on aging to be integrated. The plan recognized that:

“…all aspects of aging are interrelated [and this] implies the need for a coordinated approach to policies and research on the subject. Considering the aging process in its totality, as well as its interaction with the social and economic situation, requires an integrated approach within the framework of overall economic and social planning. Undue emphasis on specific sectoral problems would constitute a serious obstacle to the integration of aging policies and programmes into the broader development framework.” (1982: #49).

This recognition highlighted an importance shift in thinking about older populations. It recognizes the social determinants of health and thus, widens the policy scope of actions to support aging populations.

Twenty years on from the Vienna Plan, the United Nations once again convened for the second World Assembly on Ageing in Madrid, and in doing so, took a markedly different approach by focusing on and recognizing the potential of older peoples contributions to societal development. The central concept of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging (MIPAA) is A Society for All Ages, which arose out of the 1999 International Year of Older Persons. The Plan emphasizes that older persons are often treated within societies as unproductive, and that this needs to change (Huber 2005: 4). The MIPAA called for changes in attitudes, policies and programmes across all domains, focusing on three policy areas: i) older persons and development, ii) advancing health and well-being into old age, and iii) ensuring enabling and supportive environments. Importantly, the Madrid Plan states “mainstreaming ageing into global agendas is essential” (UNFPA 2012:105). It presents a call to action for governments and argued that:

A concerted effort is required to move towards a wide and equitable approach to policy integration. The task is to link ageing to other frameworks for social and economic development and human rights. The solution depends on how the problem is framed and vice-versa (i.e., the problem definition depends on the solution). (UNFPA 2012:105)

It is interesting to note that the UNFPA draws attention to ‘problem framing’ in this statement, highlighting that discursive treatments matter to public policy. Like its predecessor, the Madrid Plan called for the integration of social and economic planning—stating that, “mainstreaming ageing at the global level requires a systematic process and strategy to incorporate ageing into all facets of development programmes and policies…. [i]t requires different thinking about respective mandates and institutional frameworks, and reduction of compartmentalization” (Huber 2005: 7). Bureaucratically, the plan stated that the United Nations should integrate ageing into existing processes, programmes and development budgets and “include older persons in policy
implementation and evaluation as a matter of course” (Huber 2005: 8). Despite many similarities, the 2002 Madrid Plan did differ in several respects from its predecessor: it placed an emphasis on experiences in developing countries and economies in transition (as opposed to ‘advanced’ countries); it focused on development issues (over that of humanitarian ones) and called for ageing to be included in international development agendas and finally; it significantly increased the number of recommendations, from 62 to in the Vienna Plan, to 239 recommendations and 18 priority issues in the Madrid Plan (Sidorenko and Walker 2004: 153).

The UN’s Vienna and Madrid plans have both sought to view population aging in a positive light. In particular, the Madrid plan calls on governments to treat economic and social policy in a cohesive manner and to consider issues of intergenerational equity and fairness. It further emphasises that older populations have meaningful contributions to make to society and that it is important to provide supports that facilitate this. This positive view on aging has been adopted by other international bodies— for example the World Health Organisation’s work on ‘active aging’:

... the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation, and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age. Active ageing applies to both individuals and groups. It allows people to realize their potential for physical, social, and mental well-being throughout their lives and to participate in society according to their needs, desires, and capacities, while providing them with adequate protection, security, and care when they require assistance. (WHO 2002:12)

Active aging is largely a preventative concept. Operationalized, it seeks to have “all meaningful pursuits that contribute to the well-being of the individual concerned, his or her family, local community, or society at large” be valued and recognized and in doing so, seeks to counter the notions that individuals only contribute to society in so much as they are attached to the labour market (Walker 2002). It also places explicit value on the social determinants of health. Walker, (2009) charts the European origins of the ‘active aging’ concept and in doing so draws out distinct interpretations therein, finding European constructs to focus on health, participation and well-being and American constructs to focus on productivity.

Both the Madrid and Vienna plans brought together considerable policy expertise. For example, the drafting process of the Madrid plan included “experts from the government offices of UN members states, UN system organisations and non governmental organisations, experts and observers of the Technical Committee and the Secretariat of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (Sidorenko and Walker 2004: 148). These high profile plans and accompanying conferences have given the issue of population aging a high profile. Taken together, these international frameworks (the UN Vienna and Madrid Plans and the WHO’s work on active aging) stress positive conceptions of population aging as opposed to negative ones of the ‘apocalyptic demography’ genre (Gee & Gutman 2000). They emphasize the importance of social determinants of health including the quality of physical environment, dealing with social isolation and importantly, addressing poverty and inequality. They also call on governments to “develop a new rights-based culture of ageing and a change of mindset
and societal attitudes towards ageing and older persons, from welfare recipients to active, contributing members of society” (UNFPA 2012: 159).

Applying Schmidt’s delineations, the international frameworks discussed here forward change at the policy, programme and philosophical levels. The policy ideas set out in the frameworks are many—encompassing protection for older persons to accommodation in built environments. At the programme level, the frameworks seek to counter prevailing notions about age and productivity and in doing so, challenge core beliefs underlying policy action. The frameworks also engage at the philosophical levels—as early as the Vienna agreement they were calling for “a new economic order based on new international economic relations” (1982: #15). The Madrid agreement emphasizes that economic and social policy should be coordinated; that economic growth should be equitable; and calls for enhanced social protections and poverty eradication. The Madrid plan was the first time governments “agreed to link questions of ageing to other frameworks for social and economic development and human rights” (UN 2014). While international action sets the overarching framework under the Madrid (and Vienna) plans, national capacity building is seen as the critical scale for the success or failure of reforms (Huber 2005: 7). Importantly, the Madrid Plan sets out mechanisms for implementing “adjustment to an ageing world” and monitoring policy and change at the macro, meso and micro levels through ‘ageing mainstreaming’ and ‘ageing specific’ actions (Sidorenko and Walker 2004: 155).³ The monitoring process was designed to be bottom up and participatory (involving partnerships with a range of stakeholders)—a departure from previous UN frameworks. This partnership approach is critical to the aim of creating a ‘society of all ages’ where governments have a central role to play, but are meant to be but one of the actors effecting change. A decade on from the Madrid Plan, national governments were asked to evaluate their progress on implementing the MIPPA. Canada released reports in 2002 and most recently 2012—ten years on from the Madrid conference. These reports along with other government strategy and policy documents have been used to examine the discursive constructions of aging policy.

IV. CANADA AND AGING POLICY: REVIEWING THE MADRID COMMITMENTS

Canada is a federal parliamentary democracy with a publicly funded health care system that guarantees universal coverage for medically necessary hospital and physician services that are provided on the basis of need, rather than ability to pay (Romanow, 2002). The majority (approx. 70%) of health care spending in Canada is financed by the government (OECD, 2012).⁴ The Canada Health Act (CHA) of 1984 defines the five principles of medicare—public nonprofit administration, comprehensive benefits, universal access, portability between the provinces, and accessibility (i.e., no co-pay, deductibles, or annual limits). Currently, older adults account for about 45% of provincial

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³ Sidorenko and Walker (2004) describe ‘ageing mainstreaming’ as efforts to integrate ageing issues into all major policy domains and ‘ageing specific’ policies as actions that specifically the needs of older persons.

⁴ Health care delivery in Canada is structured as collection of 13 independent provincial single payer, public health insurance plans where the federal government retains separate responsibility for the health care of First Nations, Veterans, National Defense, and inmates in federal prisons.
health care expenditures (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2011c). Population aging is a modest contributor driving health care costs; other factors including health service use patterns and technology are more significant (Constant, Petersen, Mallory, & Major, 2011). Still, the general perception that the aging population is a cause of rising health expenditures is hard to dispel (Canadian Health Services Research Foundation, 2011; Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2011b). Federally, the aging file has bounced back and forth between the portfolios of health (Health Canada, HC) and labour development (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, HRSDC). Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC, now Employment and Social Development Canada, ESDC) led the MIPAA implementation review work in concert with other federal and provincial departments. In contrast to the participatory approach envisioned by the MIPAA, Canada’s response to implementation and reporting cannot be described as ‘bottom up’ and participatory.

Country signatories to the UN Madrid Framework have addressed the overarching goal to mainstream aging in all policy fields in a variety of ways: e.g., by creating a Minister responsible for Seniors/Aging; by creating deliberative/engagement bodies (arms length or devolved to the local level) to provide a seniors’ lens/representation in decision making; by funding research in this area; and finally, by adopting policy strategies and legislation that ‘mainstreams aging’. Canada created a Minister of State for Seniors in 2007 to champion seniors issues in government. Under this Minister of State, a National Seniors Council has also been established to report on various issues impacting seniors (this is presently composed of seven appointed members who have expertise across a variety of domains). As a federal country, provinces play the major role in health care delivery. Canada has a Federal-Provincial-Territorial Forum of Ministers Responsible for Seniors to coordinate efforts in this area and learn from cross jurisdictional practices. Provinces across Canada have adopted strategies on healthy ageing, elder abuse, long-term care, and ageing and seniors more broadly (Government of Canada 2012: 9). The federal government also provides significant funding for seniors’ health research through the Canadian Institute of Health Research. The report notes that while Canada has put in place various policies and programs to support seniors, challenges remain; notably, increasing demands for health care, stress on public pensions, increasing rates of poverty among seniors and housing affordability (HRSDC 2012: 2).

Since the 2008 global financial crisis, Canada, like many other OECD governments, has instituted austerity measures that have significantly reduced and altered social spending in a number of areas—including programs that affect seniors. The language of austerity has often connoted social spending as a zero sum game and much public debate has pitted contrasting sides in generational terms. This is particularly prevalent with calls of alarm surrounding public pensions and increasing health care costs. Within this crisis of austerity, the language of senior dependency rings strong and is reflected in daily headlines decrying the viability of our present social welfare and labour market constructs. Canada’s 2012 response to the MIPAA acknowledges the effects of the global economic crisis and prioritizes government policy as focused on “jobs and growth”. As part of this, there is a focus on engaging older workers and other groups with lower labour market attachment (e.g., persons with disabilities). This focus on productivity, and correspondingly, a two-year, phased-in increase in the pensionable age,
places labor market policy at the forefront of policy reforms. Much in the way of ideational change, such as reducing intergenerational inequalities and promoting a society for all ages, are left to soft policy measures such as celebrating National Seniors’ Day and the annual Prime Minister’s volunteer awards. Canadian responses to the MIPAA recommendations demonstrate some adoption of its policy and programme discourses—but this is neither whole nor uniform.

In *The Changing Politics of Canadian Social Policy* (2013), Rice and Prince describe ongoing tensions between economic liberalism and social protection. These tensions are apparent in Canada’s response to the MIPAA—there is a language of contrasts, with stated economic imperatives on the one hand driving responses to social policy, and yet recognition of the need to expand social protections. Within the structure of current responses, many policies are being individualized such as support for the voluntary sector and home care provision through personal tax credits as opposed to broader capacity building social supports. This is similar to policy responses in Australia “which have framed the ‘aging problem’ as a deficit that must be managed primarily by individuals and their families” (Asquith 2009).

Part of this research has included a review of the MIPAA responses of other federal states. Among these countries, Finland stands out as having adopted the most comprehensive measures where they very explicitly marry social and economic goals:

A welfare state pursues both social and economic goals. Economic development provides the operating potential for the welfare state, while social protection strengthens the balance of society and of the economy. Social protection increases people’s welfare by supporting health and functional capacity, by providing security in changing life situations, by reinforcing a sense of community and by equalising differences in society. Social protection also promotes stable economic growth and competitiveness by reinforcing work ability and by offering opportunities for employment, training and rehabilitation. (Government of Finland 2012: 10)

The Finns summarize their approach as consistent with Nordic models of “broad-based public responsibility” and further state that “no major intergenerational conflicts concerning the ‘social contract’ implied by such a model have occurred or are expected in the immediate future—the present system has solid support across all age groups” (ibid.). Overall, Finland has made significant gains towards creating a ‘society of all ages’ and reveals a study in contrasts between different approaches. The Finnish case demonstrates what is possible and the underlying ideational logic that structures their policy responses.

V. CONCLUSIONS
The MIPAA calls for older persons to be seen as productive members of society—in realizing this aim, it demands new institutional frameworks, a reduction of compartmentalization, and critically, the integration of social and economic planning. The growth of social welfare regimes through the post war period has greatly contributed to positive health outcomes and increases in longevity. However, in much economic discourse, population aging is used as a policy rationale to shrink the size of the social welfare state—thus, the very structures that have contributed to population health and
longevity are undermined (Esping-Anderson 2009). Further, this commitment seeks intergenerational fairness in policy structures and resources. Suffice to say, meeting this commitment will require long-term transformative change.

This research has reviewed the United Nations frameworks and Canadian responses at a high level. There are many extensions to this avenue of study. First, while the United Nations work on aging has been influential, so too have other international organisations, such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. The compatibility of international narratives for policy action on aging is of interest, as well as its influence on country level adoption (and vice versa). Empowerment of older persons is a major theme within the UN framework agreements and the structure of policy responses are meant to support this aim by being bottom up and participatory. In Canada, this would appear to have been given ‘light’ treatment (as is evident in the MIPAA regional implementation strategy methodology).

How aging is conceptualized matters. In *Aging and Demographic Change in Canadian Context*, the authors caution that exaggerated concerns about population aging can be harmful to rational policy making (Cheal 2003). The work presented here is a slice of a larger (ongoing) research project that examines and contrasts national level policies for aging societies in five federal states. This work aims to shed light on how population aging at the national level is being treated and problematized and consider the influence of national directions on other levels of government. There are many extensions for this line of research presented here—e.g., how do structures of governance (hierarchical versus more devolved) matter to aging policy and corresponding discourses and how is expertise constructed within different systems? Further, across governments, population aging ‘sits’ in different ministries. These divisions are often between economic and labour market policy, social policy and health—which leads one to ask, do institutional structures matter to policy outcomes and the way that aging is conceptualized (e.g., given differing disciplinary treatments? Discursive institutionalism offers a fruitful framework with which to explore these questions.
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