

MEANINGS OF OLD AGE: A STORY IN THREE VOICES

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2011

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

Meanings of Old Age: A story in three voices by Rivka Tenenbaum-Precel

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As the population of the Western world grows older, the need to understand the meaning of this stage in life grows in importance. Psychological research into the meaning of old age is posing questions on diverse levels, from that of individual ontogenesis to those of the family, community and society at large. Traditionally, developmental psychology has investigated different aspects of aging using measures of cognition, emotion, self-concept and well-being. Other approaches have examined the meaning of old age as embedded in cultural and social relations.

The present study uses a narrative approach to elicit the particular voices and interpretations of its participants. In light of pervasive, often malicious stereotypes and prejudices that are associated with old age, this approach seems to ensure candid and close to real life data. Three groups of participants were interviewed:

1. The actors — eight men and eight women 80 years old and older who were the main focus of the study.
2. The offspring — a son or daughter of each of the actor/ elderly participants.
3. The acquaintances — an acquaintance chosen by each actor/ elderly participants.

The actors were asked to respond to a general inquiry about their own lives. The offspring and the acquaintances were asked about the life of the actor. The analysis focused on the story of the actor as it was shaped by these three voices (the triad) and on the collective narratives of the three different groups.

The stories gathered in this way informed the following research questions:

1. What are the practices and meanings of “being old” in New York City at the present time?
How can these meanings inform us about the place of aging in our cultural discourses?
2. How do the perspectives of the actor, the actor’s offspring and the actor’s acquaintance resemble and differ from each other? What is the meaning of the different or similar approaches to old age? How do the different stories inform, enable and constrain each other? What do these three approaches tell us about the meaning of aging in people’s hearts and minds?
3. What are the similarities and differences within each group of participants (i.e., actor, actor’s offspring and actor’s acquaintances)? What do these similarities and differences tell us about the cultural narratives on aging?
4. To what extent are societal images of old age depicted in the individual narratives? How do individuals use these images when explaining, contemplating or questioning the stories of the aged actors?

The following themes of meaning were elicited from the transcribed interviews and discussed: (1) reflection on self at present, (2) conditions of aging, (3) everyday activities, (4) family ties, (5) self and identity, (6) beliefs and values and, (7) the future. The different voices were presented and analyzed in light of developmental and gerontological literature. The present study supports the positioning of old age as a unique developmental stage with its own rewards and challenges.

Acknowledgments

Initially, I thought I could do without an acknowledgement section; I could and, in fact, did thank everyone along the way. A friend then told me: “It’s not so much about you as it is about where you come from.” I could relate to that; my generational connections – the academic as well as the personal – deserve to be made public.

First, I would like to thank the participants in this study who shared with me their stories, understandings and meanings of life in aging. Implicitly and explicitly they offered, not only their personal views, but also their wish to change the place held by old age in our society – and I believe that they did just that.

I would also like to acknowledge the elders in my personal life who were the true inspiration behind this research: my late father, Mordechay Tenenbaum; my late father-in-law, Mariano Precel; my late mother-in-law, Helena Precel and my mother, Cily Tenenbaum. Listening to their voices in my head, I know what a privilege it was and is to be part of their old age.

This project was supported, in part, by the Sponsored Dissertation Fellowship, funded by the CUNY Graduate School and University Center. The Graduate Center has been my second home for many years; in this home, my advisor, Dr. David Bearison, has been the head of the family. Ever constructive, ever insightful, he never allowed me to do less than my best work, and he never stopped believing in me. His teachings and writings had a profound impact on my own development. Dr. Suzanne Ouellette served as the voice of patience, calmness and humor, always finding the right words to ease my anxieties and yet keep me moving forward. She taught me that one can be scholarly and still have a great story to tell. From Dr. Anna Stetsenko,

I learned what a true academic debate should look like and how one wins even when one loses. Her ideas will resonate with me always.

My two outside readers only became involved in my work during the last stages of preparation but their contributions have been invaluable. Dr. Joseph Glick has been, for me, the elder of the tribe, always there to contribute the best of experience and perspective. Dr. Wendy Luttrell, through her helpful commentary, has opened up a whole new path for me to walk.

Although technically my colleague, Dr. Jennifer Dobbins deserves to be in line with my advisors. Her constructive suggestions, deep knowledge of my work and meticulous attention to detail made this journey so much easier and so much more successful. Through their friendship, advice and affection, Vienna Messina, Heather Charatz, and Dr. Juraci Silva eased my struggles and made the dissertation process a little less lonely. Drs. Louise Ammentorp, Jennifer Astuto, Angelica Ware, Toni Spring, Karen Steinmayer, Jason Van Ora and Brett Stoudt were most generous with their time and their insights over the years. Special thanks are due to Maria Helena Reis and Judith Kubran whose administrative skills are only a small piece of the friendship and support they offered during the course of this work.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. My husband, Nahum Precel supported me through these long years, always pushing me to excel. My daughter, Heila Precel served as my technical consultant and as my inspiration; her drive to acquire knowledge and complete every assignment to utmost perfection set the best possible example for me. My step children, Danni and Keren-Or Precel, Karen and Adi Spektor-Precel, Dr. Ronit Precel, my brother, Dr. Avi Tennenbaum and the rest of my extended family have always been and continue to be my teachers, my friends, my beloved and my most enthusiastic supporters. To them, I offer my never-ending love and gratitude.

Preface

I see them in fancy restaurants, well dressed, their hair done meticulously, choosing carefully from a rich menu. I see them at McDonald's, "The McDonald's Crowd," as I refer to them. They sit by themselves eating a children's meal or sipping a small cup of tea while nibbling on the stale cookies they brought from home. I see them in the streets, elegantly dressed, their faces painted with makeup, accompanied by a younger person. I see them in parks sitting alone, taking in the day's last rays of summer sunshine. I see them at birthday parties, sometimes, enthusiastically amusing their little grandchildren but, mostly, standing on the side — observant, silent but with a smile ready for every relative or acquaintance.

Neikrug (2003) and Logan, Ward and Spitze (1992) found middle-aged people to be the group that showed the highest level of anxiety regarding old age. Hillman (1999) related this anxiety to more general questions about the meaning of life:

We want to make some sense of our aging beyond wearing out. What does aging serve? What is its point? These questions strike in the midst of living. I am getting on in years, yet am I getting on with what I really am? (p. xiv)

That is where I found myself when I started to think about this project. Old people seemed to be almost from a different culture than mine, involved in a completely different lifestyle than those my age. Most of the time, they seemed pitiful, pathetic and fragile. I knew that my perceptions of aging reflected cultural narratives and were strongly grounded in stereotypes but they were, also, influenced by personal experiences and close contact with elderly people in my own life. What was even more troubling was how much old age frightened me. I did not want to be there or be where I thought "there" was. These were my feelings and biases when I first conceived this study. I hoped to find meaning in old age that would relate to

my own life and help to allay my fears. I also knew that openly stating my prejudices and fears was just the first part of what needed to be done; I still needed to be careful not to allow my biases to contaminate my study.

Hillman (1999) provided a refreshing view of aging. In his opinion, aging brings forth the reality of one's character. He inferred that, as the biological materiel wears out, the essence of the person's character remains intact. As I began my study, I found comfort in this idea.

I also have found comfort in the following anecdote as told by Bernice Neugarten in the introduction to a selected volume of her papers:

A colleague once asked what my personal goal was in studying aging. I laughed and said, "To return old people to the human race- to make it clear that they are not a special species, or creatures from another planet." (Neugarten, 1996, p.13)

I could not have stated my personal agenda for the present study in a clearer way.

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Chapter One: Theoretical Background and Literature Review

“He who praises war has not stared it in the face.” When I read praises of old age, with which the literature of all times is stuffed, I am tempted to alter Erasmus’s expression to:

“He, who praises old age, has not stared it in the face.” (Bobbio, 2001, p. 77)

Norberto Bobbio was 87 years old and Emeritus Professor of Legal and Political Philosophy at the University of Turin, Italy when he published *Old Age and other essays* from which this quotation is taken. Bobbio stared at old age and did not like what he saw, felt or imagined. He attributed to himself and to old people, in general, qualities that he despised: conservatism and stubbornness, rejection of new ideas, living in the past and despair. He added, though, that his views were deeply influenced by a “melancholic feeling” he experienced since he started to feel old. Bobbio’s description of old age encompasses the main ideas of the present study — the personal, social and cultural narratives, the discrepancies and similarities they depict and the ways in which academic knowledge navigates the different perspectives.

Three streams of thoughts direct the present study:

1. Lifespan theory and research as it is embedded in the study of developmental psychology.
2. Research with particular groups in society, using a phenomenological approach, found in anthropological study of culture and society and in the field of gerontology, which combines medicine, sociology, psychology, nursing and social work studies.
3. The search for meaning that is valued as much as prediction and control in the social sciences and is expressed in qualitative/ narratives studies, where the voice of the participants is respected over objective measures and observations.

Life Span Theory and Developmental Psychology

In the early eighties, in my first round in a graduate school, some features were constant: every variable was quantified and every paper started with homage to its roots in Freudian psychology. Almost a generation later, variables will be presented when mentioning research of others and I am going to start with Jung.

Jung's (1962, 1978; Campbell, 1976) thoughts on human development emphasize the interaction between the individual and his or her society. Jung analyzed the vast stimulation of events, artifacts, feelings and cognitions the individual is faced with and need to use in order to carve his or her own path. This pool of information exists in the internal, inherited, personal sphere as it exists in the cultural, universal sphere and, through the process of individuation, one learns to be oneself. The need for self-realization causes people to actively seek for answers; those answers differ, however, according to the individual's time in life. If youth is a time for exploration and expansion and middle age is for establishing favored choices and questioning unnecessary ones, then old age is for increased introspection. The challenge for the first part of life is to create one's own identity and to achieve materialistic and familial assets. The later part of life is characterized by a need to contribute to community by promoting attitudes of freedom, justice and harmony and to take interest in spiritual experiences. This idea of later life as time of reflection, maturity and harmony, adds transcendental qualities to old age — something quite different from the way Bobbio (2001) experienced his old age. In contrast to other psychodynamic approaches, Jung took into account a developmental trajectory that is capable of taking the individual through old age. Studying human life as an ongoing process is also the focus of developmental psychology.

Developmental psychology has embraced lifespan theory and research as an integral part of its field. Baltes, Lindenberger and Staudinger (1998) outlined the objectives of lifespan psychology in four parts:

1. To offer an organized account regarding the overall structure and sequence of development across the lifespan.
2. To identify the interconnections between earlier and later developmental events and processes.
3. To delineate the factors and mechanisms which are the foundation of lifespan development and
4. To specify the biological and environmental opportunities and constraints which shape lifespan development of individuals.

Lifespan psychology is a subfield of developmental psychology that looks at the entire course of life without dwelling on specific age related periods. It is an over-arching theory that strives to integrate the cumulative work of ontogenesis. In that sense, theories of development should consider that ontogenesis occurs from birth to old age or more poetically, from the moment of conception to the moment of dying. If one wishes to extend the territory even further, then considerations of biological inheritance and the cultural impact and legacy of death and dying are also a natural part of the inquiry. Baltes, Lindengerer and Staudinger (1998) mentioned three factors within the field of developmental psychology that explained the growing interest in lifespan psychology:

1. The population as a whole is living longer and, hence, the elderly have evolved from a minority to a growing segment of the population with its own specific needs and growing influence. The rapid joining of the baby boomers to the ranks of old age changes consumers'

trends, as well as trends in popular media and popular science regarding old age and attracts, also, scholarly interests.

2. The emerging and fast growing field of gerontology posts a challenge to developmental psychology to give answers to this field's questions within the scope of developmental psychology.

3. Theoreticians, researchers and leaders in the field of developmental psychology are growing older, side by side with their participants, especially the ones doing longitudinal research and, thereby, enhancing this field of inquiry that is inspired by the wish of researchers to know more about their age.

Erik H. Erikson's theory of development.

Erik H. Erikson (1963, 1986, 1988, 1997) is one of the most frequently cited psychologists regarding lifespan development. One of the earliest longitudinal studies that involved following babies and their parents from birth to old age was inspired by his ideas and conducted under his guidance (Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick, 1986).

Erikson's theory emerged from the Freudian psychosexual theory of personality development. The essence of his theory is that personality continues to develop through life and that culture, society and history are major players in this process. Erikson's model proposes eight stages of development that starts at birth and ends with life itself. The model stresses advancing simultaneously in time (i.e., age) and in appropriate challenges to master (i.e., society's demands). Each stage is characterized by a psychosocial crisis that, when resolved in a normative manner, results in the emergence of ego strengths or virtues. These become the tools with which a person adjusts to the social order and enhances the quality of his or her life. Although specific virtues emerge from the positive ways of handling each stage of growth, they

must be developed, redefined and reaffirmed continually throughout a person's life. The model, therefore, stresses the spiraling nature of development (Erikson, 1997). When experiencing specific points in time, traces of previously experienced stages need to be found. In other words, each stage contains the footprints, lessons and influences of the stages that came before it. In a spiral construct, where each link contains parts of the whole, old age becomes the best and last opportunity to investigate the implications and understanding of previous developmental achievements. In that sense, old age's personality developments are viewed not only in light of the last stage but, more so, in light of all stages that are encompassed in the last one. Daatland (2003) similarly argued that aging may be a most appropriate "laboratory" for research on individual competence and motivation.

Erikson's eight developmental stages are as follows:

1. Trust vs. Mistrust. Trust develops out of the nurturing relationships with the caregiver. When these relationships are constantly frustrating because basic needs are not met, a deep-seated feeling of worthlessness might develop, along with a mistrust of the world in general. Virtues and basic strengths that emerge from this stage are drive and hope.

2. Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt. The child learns to express his or her will power and independence through mastering skills like walking, talking and feeding him/herself. Finer motor skills are also learned and practiced. Another major development is toilet training. When supported in these expressions, a child learns to trust and appreciates his or her autonomy. And in doing so, develops positive self-esteem. Otherwise, the vulnerability inherent in this stage may lead to feelings of doubt and shame regarding oneself. Virtues and basic strengths that emerge from this stage are self-control, courage and will power.

3. Initiative vs. Guilt. In this stage, the child develops motor and mental abilities. The child has the maturity to combine physical and cognitive abilities that allow him or her to turn ideas into actions. Some of these ideas and actions might not be accepted socially and, therefore, lead to feelings of guilt. The virtue and basic strength to emerge from this stage is purpose.

4. Industry vs. Inferiority. By being productive, the child wins recognition. Some degree of competence is needed to put new skills into use. This stage is also very social; experiencing feelings of inadequacy may result in a damaging sense of inferiority. The virtues and basic strength to emerge in this stage are method and competence.

5. Identity vs. Role Diffusion. In this stage, the focus is to a) find a self-image that makes sense and is consistent with one's ideas of oneself, b) to discover oneself as an individual separate from his or her family of origin and as a member of a wider society and c) to lay foundations for an identity that provides continuity with the past and orientation towards the future. The virtues and basic strengths to emerge from this stage are devotion and fidelity.

6. Intimacy vs. Isolation. In the initial stage of being an adult, the individual is seeking intimate relationships, close friends and sexual unions. Development of a sense of caring and commitment takes place without fear of losing one's personal sense of identity. A failure in this developmental stage may lead to isolation and distance from others. The virtues and basic strengths to emerge from this stage are affiliation and love.

7. Generativity vs. Stagnation. In this stage, work is a central concern; activity reflects teaching, guidance and concern for the next generation rather than one's own. A significant task is to perpetuate culture and transmit cultural values through the family. When the individual is not satisfactorily engaged with his surrounding, he may be overwhelmed by a sense of

stagnation, self-absorption, boredom and interpersonal impoverishment. The virtues and basic strengths to come out from this stage are production and care.

8. Ego integrity vs. Despair. If much of life is a preparation to the adulthood stage, then the last stage is recovering from it, adjusting to a different path and changing goals from those of adulthood. Old age is a time of reflection and continued self-fulfillment. There is a need to look back on one's life with happiness and contentment while experiencing an ever stronger sense that life has meaning. The focus is on acceptance of one's life accomplishments and failures while acknowledging one's own contributions. This feeling, which Erikson refers to as integrity, helps determine the quality and goals for the remainder of life. Crisis resolution during the earlier life stages helps to determine the quality of reflection during later adulthood. However, one can reach this stage of development and experience despair at his or her perceived failures. This despair is enhanced by fears surrounding the end of life that become harder to deny as one advances in years. With the approach of life's ending comes the realization of life's disappointments; what went wrong in earlier times cannot be mended and dreams not actualized by this stage, will not come true. The virtue and basic strength to emerge from this stage is wisdom.

Gerotranscendence and disengagement theories.

Relatively apart in time, place of origin and emotional attitudes towards the process of aging, the two following developmental- gerontological theories have, still, in common, their positioning towards Erikson's development through stages theory. The disengagement theory, first proposed and articulated by Cumming and Henry in their book *Growing old* (1961) and *Gerotranscendence- a developmental theory of positive Aging*, introduced by Lars Tornstam (2005), consider aging to be a developmental process influenced by biological, individual and

social forces that operate in various channels through the life cycle. However, the focus of these theories is on the stage of old age and, like Erikson, they believe old age to be a distinct and complicated stage of life, a stage that follows developmental trajectories that were laid in the personal and social past but, also, marks a developmental peak in the present.

Disengagement theory.

Disengagement theory was the fruit of a longitudinal project known as the Kansas City Study of Adult Life, conducted between 1952 and 1962 (Cumming and Henry, 1961; Williams and Wirths, 1965). Seven hundred and fifty participants between the ages of 40 and 70 and 280 participants between the ages of 50-90 were interviewed, observed, tested with psychological measures and clinically assessed. The study elicited rich data concerning life habits, attitudes, perceptions and personality styles connected directly and indirectly to issues of aging and aging in society. Disengagement theory postulates aging as a natural process that, inevitably, involves a decline of physical and cognitive properties. As a consequence of this decline, aging also involves a mutual withdrawal of the elderly from society and of society from its elderly. As the individual prepares for the inevitable and universally experienced decline, a disengagement process is activated, usually at the formal retirement stage. This disengagement is characterized by fewer social relations, fewer social interactions and less involvement in social institutions and social affairs. Once the individual starts to disconnect from the social institutions in which he or she were members, changes can be identified in three levels:

1. Changes in the number of people one interacts with and changes in the number of interactions.
2. Qualitative changes in the style and patterns of interaction of the individual with others in his or her surroundings.

3. Personality changes in the individual that are both the cause and the result of decreased involvement with others. Concurrently, a rise in self-involvement and preoccupation with oneself are detected and are, at times, labeled as selfish behaviors.

According to the theory, these processes exist universally, although each culture generates different meanings from them. The process can be more voluntary in some cultures; it can be initiated by the individual as opposed to forced withdrawal. In some cultures the process is embedded in societal values that preserve an image of the wise old man. There, disengagement becomes a respected process. The Druze, for example (Gutman, 1976), have a special role for the elderly in their religious structure. A significant part of the religion is considered a secret to most of the believers and is only revealed to the elderly at the proper time. Once they enter the inner religious circle, they earn a special place as mentors and guardians of religious dogma. Attributes, such as tranquility, contemplation and spirituality, become part of their societal image and their behavioral repertoire. And, like cultures that sanctify the obsessed while others lock him in an asylum, the attributes of withdrawal, detachment and disengagement are admired in the Druze's elderly.

According to the theory, disengagement does not imply despair or sadness but the opposite: a successful process of disengagement will result in high morale and high satisfaction in life. Disengagement theory started from 1) the observation that old people are less involved in the life around them in comparison to younger people, and 2) the researchers' attempt to inspect this phenomenon, objectively, without judging its perceived social desirability.

However, the book *Growing Old* (1961) by Cumming and Henry is now out of print. And if the amount of dispute and criticism a theory generates is a measure of its success and strength, then disengagement theory was very powerful indeed. The authors were accused of

sample biases, non-established generalizations and inaccurate measures. Difficulties in replicating the findings were often raised but, more than anything, the theory failed to resonate within people's hearts. In academic and popular circles, people were not ready to refer to old age and old people as voluntarily disengaging from the world. On a metaconceptual level, the authors expressed what no one else was ready to put forth. Their findings pulled the rug out from under social workers, caregivers and other institutions whose goal was to help aged people to make the best out of their aging years. If one were to follow the practical derivatives of the theory, then efforts to engage elderly people in society, in activity, in finding the channels that will keep them alert and in the moment are really working against the natural course of development. An interesting question is what would have been the future of disengagement theory if Cumming and Henry had used a more positive concept. For the contemporary reader, disengagement takes the mind directly to the dark places of our Western societal memory — the forgotten old man, the old lady and her furious cats, the silent sitters in nursing homes and, the ultimate disengagement, death. The theory was intended to explain disengagement from both sides: the elderly and the rest of society. In fact, the choice of language suggested, right from the start, the legitimacy of distancing the aged from the social arena. I speculate that a choice of words intended to be non-prejudicial, actually, achieved the opposite reaction. A possible explanation for the many objections this theory aroused was the difficulty in dealing with the subtextual message that came with it: Disengagement is good for the elderly and good for us. During the early sixties, psychology was less involved in relativism and political correctness. Participants were called "subjects" and TAT stories were valued over the anecdotes that people told about their own lives. Still, the framing of old age as a developmental stage whose main mission was to move away from life to the shadow of death was too strong. It was as if science

gave legitimacy to a known emotional phenomenon, one that society was not really proud of. The data pointed to the conclusion that these people are not interested in more activities but less; they are not seeking engagement, no matter what its form or essence may be. They are disengaging.

Thirty years later, Bearon (1996) pointed out that disengagement was generated in a period of shorter life expectancy, earlier and more difficult prospects of disability, work roles that took a toll on physical strength, mandatory retirement and very few organized activities and social structures for old people. The Kansas City Study (Cumming and Henry, 1961) gathered data on a massive scale. It addressed issues that were not dealt with in other approaches and its data helped develop the field for many years to come. Achenbaum and Bengston (1994) reviewed the construction of the disengagement theory, the historical background that shaped its development and the sharp criticism that, unfortunately, suppressed any continuation. In their words:

Thirty years later, “disengagement theory” represents an impressive, if flawed, attempt at comprehensive explanation concerning the observable changes that characterize the human aging process. It was the first truly comprehensive, truly explicit, and truly multidisciplinary theory advanced by social and behavioral scientists in gerontology.

(p.762)

They concluded:

The criticism seemed to stifle any further development. This is unfortunate and represents a Pyrrhic victory for the critics because no subsequent model or theoretical statement in social gerontology of similar status has been proposed, nor generated the intellectual excitement of the theory presented in ““growing old.” (p. 762)

Marshall (1994) shared the opinion that the Kansas City Study had a profound influence on advancing the study of normal aging. However, although they contributed immensely to the understanding of aging in a life span perspective, disengagement theories were failing to find engagement in new ways and new contents.

Gerotranscendence.

Growing old – the process of disengagement, is how Cumming and Henry (1961) entitled their manuscript on the Kansas City Study of adult life. *Gerotranscendence - a developmental theory of positive aging* is how Tornstam (2005) titled his study of aging. Both studies reflected the same drive: a better understanding of human development and especially the old age stage; they entailed the same massive amount of data gathering, similar phenomena were inspected but each reflects a different set of concepts. One important finding arose from both projects: a satisfying old age is the norm and not the exception.

Similar to Cumming and Henry (1961), Tornstam (1992, 1996, 1997, 2005) considered gerotranscendence to be a universal developmental trend: “Human nature encompasses a general tendency toward gerotranscendence which is in principal universal and culture free” (2005, p. 45). Cumming and Henry considered disengagement to be a natural process: the aging individual has the need to withdraw from society as much as society has the need to withdraw from the aging individual. For Tornstam (1997) the emphasis is on the positive experience of the process:

Human aging, the very process of living into old age, is characterized by a general potential towards gerotranscendence. Simply put, gerotranscendence is a shift in meta-perspective, from a materialistic and pragmatic view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally, accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction. (p. 143)

Tornstam (2005) re-emphasizes the way gerotranscendence is experienced by the individual:

The gerotranscendent individual, typically, experiences a redefinition of the self and of relationships to others and a new understanding of fundamental, existential questions.

The individual becomes, for example, less self-occupied and, at the same time, more selective in the choice of social and other activities. (p. 3)

Tornstam developed his theory on the basis of qualitative data, using in-depth interviews with individuals in their mid and old age regarding their perspectives on personality development and changes they experienced as they reached elder years. On the basis of his qualitative findings, he developed a series of quantitative measures of emotional and behavioral perceptions of old people about their lives and selves. Tornstam's original group of participants was a self-selected group of people who found his theoretical assumptions interesting and could identify with the processes he mentioned. His research reflected a fundamental shift that occurred within human development research: from indirect methods designed to reveal what denial mechanisms might conceal from researchers and their participants, to an open, clear and symmetrical course of communication where participants have knowledge about their lives and are asked to share it with the researchers in the most direct way possible.

The in depth qualitative responses from the participants who, initially, felt that the basic components of the theory spoke to them, generated a structure of development that created the gerotranscendence theoretical perspective. Three dimensions were identified: 1) the cosmic dimension, 2) the dimension of the self and 3) the social and personal relationships dimension.

The cosmic dimension is constructed from changes in:

1. Time and childhood: A more fluid sense of connection between past and present is created. A new understanding of childhood occurs and past events are interpreted in a reconciling manner.
2. Connection to earlier generation: The continuity of life is more important than the individual self; there is an ability to feel a part of a greater cosmic order.
3. Life and death: Fear of death diminishes and a new comprehension of the two forces of nature is experienced.
4. Mystery in life: The unknown, irrational and inexplicable dimensions of life are embraced.
5. Rejoicing: A sense of joy in experiencing the small and the grand events of life, a new appreciation of nature and aesthetics.

The self dimension includes the items:

1. Decrease in self-centeredness: Self ceases to be the center of one's universe, although, for people with previous difficulties in self-appreciation, a struggle to maintain a level of comfort might occur.
2. Development of body transcendence: While care for one's body continues, the individual is not obsessed about it.
3. Self-transcendence: There is a sense of life's puzzle being solved, a sense of wholeness that is appreciated and observed, sometimes, in states of tranquility and solitude.

The social and personal relationship dimension includes:

1. Role play: There is an increased sense of the difference between one's inner perception and the experiencing of self and the roles taken or imposed by society at different

stages of life. The individual gains the comforting understanding that most of the roles can be changed and can include what is really important for him or her, regardless of society's demands.

2. Emancipated innocence: A sense of renewal and innocence emerges from maturity and the ability to renounce unnecessary social conventions.

3. Modern asceticism: A new sense of modesty combined with understanding the burdens of wealth is developed; there is an appreciation for having the necessities of life with no need of more.

4. Everyday wisdom: The individual learns to withhold judgment and counsel that is based on strict guidelines for right and wrong; a new sense of tolerance is developed.

The main idea shared by Erikson's theory of development, Cumming and Henry's theory of disengagement and Tornstam's theory of gerotranscendence is their overarching understanding of old age as a distinct and different time of life — a time impacted by the realization of a life lived successfully (or not) — and with the constant reminder of its approaching conclusion and death. All three approaches are based on the presumption that although there are individual differences in the definitions of time and borders of old age and social differences in the treatment and acceptance of old age, it is a singular and unique developmental stage.

William Thomas' approach to aging.

Thomas (1996, 1999, 2004) used a special vocabulary when referring to old people and their place on the developmental trajectory, a vocabulary that captured some of the insights of the present study. A few alternatives were used in the present study: seniors, the elderly, older people, old people, old age. Thomas referred to his targeted population as elders and to their specific time in life as elderhood. His choice of words brought up a different mode of reference

and a different world of associations. Elders are the wise leaders of human society; elderhood depicts a group elevated from the rest of society because of its high rank and virtues of wisdom and leadership.

Thomas (2004) proposed a developmental look on old age that emphasized the potential contributions and the uniqueness experienced in that stage of life. Shaped through years of practicing geriatric medicine, his views turned the traditional, medical paradigm upside down for practitioners and researchers who strive to see old age in a new light. According to Thomas, elderhood offered to those who were willing to surrender to it, the ability to experience a rich, different way of living. Western society is entering an era blessed with the largest group of elders the world has ever seen, elders who are for the most part, well educated, financially comfortable, healthy, socially engaged and ready to confront the values of the productive adult world. As people enter into old age, they start to realize the potential for living elderhood as a unique life stage and not as an artificial revival of adulthood. Thomas distinguished between senescence and elderhood:

Senescence, like adolescence is a time of transition. It is letting go of something comfortable and familiar (in this case, the practice of adulthood) and a reaching out for something new and different. Elderhood has the revolutionary liberating potential that is often misinterpreted and misunderstood. The source of its richness lies in the transition to a life defined by the experience of Being-Doing. This is a gift of great value. (p126)

Doing versus Being.

Thomas' (1996, 1999, 2004) discussion on forms of existence and the way they interact in development provided an existentialistic outlook on old age. Thomas identified two forms of experiencing one's existence: Doing and Being. These two opposite poles represented, in

various combinations, the essence of living: Doing is manipulating the visible, material world around us in various ways. We do our job, we do our laundry, we do things that give results that can be measured. We use machines that generate energy and change the environment around us. We cannot survive as a species and as individuals without doing.

Doing is what happens when we come into relationship with and manipulate the visible, material world that surrounds us. Human work is usually thought of in terms of doing.... all living creatures depend on doing for their survival. Homo sapiens and many other species learned how to make other creatures work for them.... the purest expression of doing, however, is found in the roots and technologies created by humans themselves. (p. 117)

Being is the opposite pole of living. By Being, Thomas (2004) meant being in a relationship with oneself, with others and with the environment. Being is the ability to create and sustain relationships. Being involves things that cannot be seen and don't have concrete results, for example, being married, being oneself, being part of a community, being attentive to one's inner experiences and feelings. The two modes, Doing and Being don't exist without each other. They operate together through our life time. However, different stages in life are characterized by a different balance and a different emphasis we place upon the qualities of each mode. When developed properly, childhood and old age should be characterized by the BEING-doing mode, where Being takes a central place. Adulthood is the time when the Doing mode takes precedence and can, therefore, be described as a DOING –being mode. One of the most important freedoms in the modern society is the freedom to decide, change and adjust the levels of Doing and Being that suit one best in a particular time. And the more crucial time to exercise

this freedom is during elderhood, when environmental, social and personal changes take place and force the individual to adapt accordingly.

Activity and continuity approaches.

In a different view of old age, activity and continuity perspectives emphasize finding the unchanged aspects in the lives of people in their old age comparing to their middle age years. Activity approaches state that as long as a person is active and involved physically and socially, he or she might be more equipped to chase the shadows of aging away (Rowe and Kahn, 1998). Activity approaches emphasize keeping the elderly as active as possible, cognitively, socially and physically. The assumption is that activity – being engaged in everyday life, in leisure assignments, in social interaction — will keep the mind and soul of the old person as lucid as possible, essentially, extending his or her middle age. More importantly, activity will lessen the unavoidable anxiety and depression that are prone to occur when an old person takes an honest and realistic look at his or her situation. Activity approaches start from a model that sees human beings as motivated first and foremost by an equilibrium force (Havighurst, 1960, 1975). Inevitable changes in old age threaten to disturb that balance and the main call of practitioners and theoreticians is to find satisfying ways to restore that inner and outer sense of balance in one's life. Dobrof (2002) recalled how, during her years as a social worker in a nursing home, she was often advised by the caretakers to avoid talking with the residents about their past lives; talking about past events would make these elders emotional and sad. The best thing, she was told, was to urge them to be involved in activity, usually arts and crafts or similar functions. Along the same lines, Katz (2000) illustrated how positioning activity as the positive force against the negative forces of dependency, illness, depression and withdrawal, absurdly pressures residents in nursing homes and members in day centers to perform and produce.

In a continuity approach, old age is a reflection of the constant effort by the individual and the society to prolong middle age. Successful aging is the potential to continue work and leisure patterns from years before while maintaining, if not increasing, the number and intensity of relationships and social interactions. Disruption of that chain is considered a breakdown, a deviancy, a sorrowful and piteous event. Atchley (1989, 1999) sketched a theory of continuity, which stated that adult development was continuous, as the individual lives through changing situations and adapts to them. Atchley saw continuity as a dynamic concept, one that embraced the idea of a basic core of personal entity that was stable and persisted over time but that, also, allowed for variety of changes and adaptive choices. Atchley distinguished between internal continuity, a remembered inner structure and, external continuity that included structures of physical and social environments, role relationships and activities. Atchley analyzed continuity patterns and their relation to adaptations to aging. The main feature of continuity approaches is the idea of adaptation to unavoidable changes through the use of inner and outer knowledge and strategies. At its core, good aging will still be aging that requires as little adaptation as possible, which in turn would indicate that aging had affected the individual only in minor aspects.

It seems that activity approach would win the higher score with people involved in caretaking and in social services, with professionals like social workers, medical people, rehabilitation specialists and any of us who are directly involved in caring for an elderly person. Activity approaches are practical because they hold a solution: As long as the elderly are involved in activity — physical and social and the more the better — they will have better adjustment, livelihood, enjoyment and energy. They will overcome feelings of fatigue and despair and postpone the surrender to age and then to death. Continuity approaches are popular with middle age and old age groups, in a very down to earth way and, perhaps, on a more

theoretical level with younger groups as well. It seems that the best old age possible is one that is a continuation of middle age. We might compromise on some gray hair and wrinkles here and there, we might moderate our exercise plan in the gym — but we will do our best to maintain a healthy way of life and cognitive engagements, if it ensures that our old age will be similar to our middle age years. The social mirror of these approaches promotes a huge cosmetic industry, new age movements, natural and herbal treatments, meditation and immortality groups that associate old age with death and decline and figure that the best way to avoid decline and death is by staying young forever (Nuland, 2007).

Summary

Disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry, 1961), Erikson's stages theory (Erikson, 1963, 1986, 1997), William Thomas approach (1996, 1999, 2004) and Tornstam's gerotranscendence theory (Tornstam, 1996, 1997, 2005) all acknowledge old age as a special and significant part of life but they differ in their interpretation of the mechanisms that evolves and develops at that time. Disengagement theory was accused of being heavily influenced by the social atmosphere and perceptions of old age that prevailed at that time. Erikson's theory was criticized for restricting the place and goals it dedicated to the elderly. Tornstam's theory and Thomas' ideas reflected the swift changes in research and social approaches towards old age. It's no longer obvious that old age is synonymous with decline. Tornstam's and Thomas' approaches has the flavor of eastern, new age ideas and it seems that pushing the gerotranscendence state a bit further might bring one to the edge of the eastern nirvana. According to Tornstam, his theory is oriented towards the future; the state of gerotranscendence is a move into an engulfing realm, an experience that colors all new challenges and actions in an inspiring light. According to Tornstam, Erikson's concepts of integrity or despair are determined

through retrospection and are, therefore, positioned in the past. What was done in a person's past life determines what form the eighth and last crisis will take. The disengagement theory's vision of an ideal old age is similar to that of Erikson's: the cultural archetype of the integrated old man, contemplating on life lived, telling memories or lessons learned, leaning on a tree while closing his eyes and letting the last ray of sun caress his face. Gerotranscendence changes the present to better the future by creating the possibility of a quiet introspection of the world and one's place in it, allowing, among other things, experiencing everyday affairs in an anxiety free mode. Thomas' descriptions on elderhood emphasize the opportunity to lead a life that appreciates similar values: the ability to enjoy being in the world, concentrating on emotional inner life and simple acts of living.

The Eighth Stage.

This stage has been given many names: the eighth stage (Erikson, 1963) the ninth stage (Erikson, 1997), the third stage (Weiss and Bass, 2002), the fourth stage (Vincent, 2003) or for those less comfortable with numbers, the young old, the older old (Hinck, 2004; Neugarten, 2006), senescence and elderhood (Thomas, 2004). Age, like time itself, seems to be slippery (Eyal, 1996). When is one old? When are you old? When did my father grow old? When is it a concern? When is it a blessing? Given the changes of the 20th and 21st centuries in life expectancy and with better prospects for aging bodies to function quite well, the once clear cut marker for old age is not that clear anymore. For some, being old is just a mathematical calculation: the sum of years one has left to live is smaller than the sum of years he or she has already lived. However, whether it's unexpected or it is a seamless, flowing process, old age comes in a series of perceptions, events and feelings that indicate personally and socially that one might be "too old".

Erikson was accused of having a simplistic and poetic view of human life; critics claimed that his outlook on human development was utopian, Christian and Western (Hren Hoare, 2002). However, it's important to remember that while each stage represents a main turning point or crisis, development overall is spiral and occurs on many levels. Indicating a specific challenge for a specific stage does not mean that all the aspects of previous stages are set aside. The opposite is true; their influence and traces are built in to the current stage and are made evident in the functions and concerns of the individual.

For Erikson, the eighth stage represented a time of reflection, of remembrance, of putting things in order and in perspective. The main challenge of the eighth stage is looking at the life lived and accepting it, hopefully, with pride and satisfaction. The source of satisfaction in this stage comes more from the past than the present and a positive outlook on gains and losses helps to maintain an integrated sense of self. Once the crisis is resolved, the person is able to continue on to the next stage of life equipped with insight and the ability to contribute further to his or her surroundings. In that sense, an integrated self is supposed to help the individual to move through the challenges of his or her elder years.

Erikson saw the main challenge of the eighth stage as coming to peace with the past. The flip side of Erikson's last stage is despair, a disappointing examination of life lived and the realization that many of the undesirable turns in the way can't be undone. Despair can lead to another well-documented image of old age: the bitter, desperate, not so clean, angry and repulsive old man. For Erikson, the ethical person, the spiritual scholar, looking back with satisfaction at a life well lived with productivity and generativity, is what the human soul yearns for. However, in his later years, Erikson started to feel that to hope for such a constant, content and ever present feeling would be unrealistic. As he lived through his older years, experiencing

the betrayal of his body and realizing that some of his professional challenges were not met, Erikson felt that it would be too much to ask for anyone to be integrated fully. So, he acknowledged that some despair was normal and unavoidable when trying to fight against the erosion of aging (Hren Hoare, 2002).

It seems that Erikson's theory should have had more appeal in a research paradigm that shifts from quantitative to qualitative data analysis, precisely, because his concepts call for meaning making interpretations and could be repositioned as themes in content/narratives analysis. Also, in their later writings (1986, 1997), Erik and Joan Erikson reorganized their thinking about old age and addressed some of the criticism regarding the insignificant place they seemed to give to activity and productivity in old age. Still, integrity and despair are good ways to describe the polarity that takes place in old age and as is the process in all the other stages- the challenge is met if, in general, a person shows more acts of trust than mistrust, more acts of generativity than stagnation and more acts of integrity than despair. Rohovit (2000) claimed that Erikson's descriptions and analyses of old age reflected the fear and anxiety that are typical of middle adulthood members when looking into the future. The assumption that middle-aged people display the most anxieties concerning old age was raised by other researchers in the area (Logan, Ward and Spitze, 1992; Hillman, 1999; Neikrug, 2003). Whether being in a specific stage helps to gain insight into it or not, or whether the amount of the person's life experience is relevant and crucial in generating an abstract literal theory, Joan Erikson, when reaching her nineties, felt impelled to add a ninth stage that would fit the old old. Erikson J. (1997) described the ninth stage in old age as a time where the dystonic elements of development take precedence over the syntonic ones. In other words, expressions of disgust, despair, stagnation, isolation, identity confusion, guilt, shame, doubt and mistrust are more salient than their opposite poles

(trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy, generativity and integrity). Joan Erikson preferred to refer to the aggravations she experienced in old age as the ninth stage, implying, that this is what happened to you when you really get old. It seems, however, that experiencing the less cheerful side of old age can be the fate of many people in their eighth stage as well, when “one’s focus may become thoroughly circumscribed by concerns of daily functioning so that it is enough just to get through a day intact, however satisfied or dissatisfied one feels about one’s previous life history” (p. 113).

Erikson, Erikson and Kivnick (1986) conducted interviews with 29 individuals ranging in age from 75 to 90 years old. These individuals were part of a larger group of families — children and their parents — that participated in a longitudinal study about development and parenting that started in the late twenties. Throughout the duration of the study, information was gathered about children and their parents that related to many life areas. When listening to the surviving parents, the researchers obtained perspectives on previous years, data on history and societal changes and shifts in child rearing patterns. The participants’ narratives were organized alongside the eight sets of traits that characterized every developmental stage. In their view, old age was the time when the different motives could be encompassed and inspected in all their variability while experiencing the forces of integrity, wisdom and despair. As the authors put it: “These elders are, through a complex of processes that are partly conscious and partly unconscious, attempting to reconcile the earlier psychosocial themes and to integrate them in relation to current old age development” (p. 55). And they continue:

But what are the activities, the concerns, the involvements through which our informants engage in these processes? What are the terms in which they re-experience the eight different themes that we identify as the psychological tensions of a lifetime? How, on the

basis of a unique life cycle and a unique complex of psychological dynamics, does each individual struggle to reconcile earlier themes in order to bring into balance a lifetime sense of trustworthy wholeness and an opposing sense of bleak fragmentations? (p. 55)

Through the stories of the individuals who talked about different issues of their life, the authors reviewed the ways in which elderly people's reflections on their lives illuminated the different themes and the ways these themes were organized within their actions, interactions and inner life. Their review included aspects of each theme and how it was depicted in old age, starting with the eighth's stage main dilemma:

How is it that one individual may seem able to integrate painful conditions of old age into a new form of psychosocial strength while another may respond to similar conditions in a fashion that seems to inhibit effective integration and healthy, ongoing development? (p. 55)

The significance of old age is that, in this final stage, the individual is forced to look at his or her life from the standpoint of a life cycle that is nearly completed rather than one that has yet to be lived. The existential anxiety of not being becomes far more real and takes more strength to deny, avoid or ignore. Participants in the Erikson et al's longitudinal study (1986) tended to relate to this tension in several ways. Some brought forward memories of older people in their past and tried to integrate those memories with who they themselves had become. Another tactic was to compare one's life to the lives of other seniors — either celebrities and media figures or other individuals in one's community — and, by doing so, empowering one's own actions. An active orientation towards the present and the near future helped as well to develop a sense of completeness.

“Old age? Never heard of it.”

From an optimistic angle generated through her extensive work on the life stories of eight people between the ages of 85-100, Ward- Baker(2005) also wished to add a ninth developmental stage that she referred to as “Creativity versus Apathy.” In her description of her participants, she said:

Neither succumbing to the cultural expectations for old age nor drifting into a level of transcendence, they worked creatively with the skills and interests they found within themselves and with the whole array, positive and negative, of what the world offered to them or threw at them. (p. 257)

Whether directly (Koch, 2000; Moody in Cole and Gadow, 1986; Rohovit 2000; Hazan, 1994;Ward-Baker, 2005) or indirectly, (Kaufman, 1986; Kahn, 1990; Eisenhandler, 1986) various studies in the field argued against the emphasis on old age as a time for reflecting and bringing order to the past. In these studies old people were active, oriented toward the future as much as towards the past and living forcefully in the present.

The Berlin Aging Study

The Berlin Aging Study (Baltes and Mayer, 1999) demonstrated a different approach to the study of old age. This project was a vast empirical longitudinal study that collected a large amount of information on a broad sample of the aged population of Berlin. The study is an example of continuing efforts to gather information on psychological, sociological, socio-biographical, economical and demographical dimensions in order to portray old age, aging and their inter-correlations. The objective of the Berlin Aging Study was to identify what constitutes the experience of old age — and more than that, what might be identified as predictors of positive aging (Lindenberger and Baltes 1997; Baltes and Smith, 1997; Kunzmann, Little and

Smith, 2000; Singer, Verhaeghen, Ghisletta, Lindenberger and Baltes 2003). Baltes and Smith (1997) used the information gathered on the aging population to construct a wholistic view of human psychological functioning. Lindenberger and Baltes (1997) documented age trends, interrelations and correlations of intellectual abilities in old age and advanced old age, using data from fourteen different measures. They identified points of crisis and deterioration and periods of stability. Their results suggested that people around the age of seventy experience the most significant loss in their cognitive ability. This point in time indicated, at least statistically, the transition to old age. From then on, the rate of decline was more moderate. In addition, age-induced biological factors were the most prominent source of individual differences in old and very old populations. These factors referred mainly to changes in brain structure that occurred through all stages of life but tended to increase in old age. Singer, Verhaeghen, Ghisletta, Lindenberger and Baltes (2003) looked at changes in cognitive abilities in very old age. They found that, while perceptual speed, memory and fluency declined with old age, informative knowledge remained stable up to the age of 90, showing signs of decline thereafter. Kunzmann, Little and Smith (2000) using data from the Berlin Aging Study, looked at measures of subjective well-being and what might affect their stability in old age. They found that age, per se, was not the cause of decline in subjective well-being, however, health constraints were.

Baltes et al (1998) developed a model that offered a systemic view of human development across the lifespan using objective data that organized successes and failures in a balanced structure. Their Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) model positioned goals, decision-making and outcomes in a positive light. In their view, adaptation to one's situation was the functional state of being and indicated a normative development. The process of adaptation was always studied while taking into consideration the constraints of the individual

within his or her given society. There is, however, a judgmental bias to it. As people approach stages in life that are characterized with more losses, they, inevitably, have to work harder on finding satisfying compensations. The evaluation of the consequences may be biased when the negative aspects are stronger and adaptation includes painful renunciations. The Berlin Aging Study is a valuable data source for tracing trends in behavioral and psychological dimensions as they can be depicted through valid and normalized scales. Some of their major conclusions support the assumption that there is more to old age than age itself.

More empirical research.

The empirical, more traditional approach, which captures the vast body of research and the established methodology for dealing with quantitative data, treats old age as an independent variable and tries to find how elderly people perform on different measures. The investigated areas include cognitive, emotional, social, spiritual and physical dimensions. In old age-oriented research, this line has generated studies that applied general and quantitative measures to the lives of old people. The ideology is to compare old age performance with norms collected from younger populations. By trying to determine what conditions and traits aid the older populations to reach higher levels of happiness and success in life, researchers find out which of these topics can then be adapted and applied to rehabilitations and treatment programs for elder individuals. Carson (1986) asked: “What are the essential ingredients of a livable old age? Health? Work? Companionship? Intimacy? What else and in what combinations?” (p. xii). Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling and Potter (2002) provided a comprehensive picture of age differences in self-esteem from age 9 to 90, using cross-sectional data collected from 326,6419 participants via the Internet. They found that self-esteem levels were high in childhood, dropped during adolescence, rose gradually throughout adulthood and declined sharply in old age. Old

age was defined to be around the age of seventy. In addition to the more obvious interpretation of the results that attributed a decline in self-esteem to the general decline in physical and emotional strengths and abilities, the authors provided an alternative explanation to this decline that drew upon Erikson's theory. According to their explanation, old people tended to be wiser and more comfortable with themselves than younger people. Therefore, it was not that deep feelings of self-worth declined in old age but, rather, that older people increasingly accepted their faults and limitations and, correspondingly, had a diminished need for self-promotion and self-glorification — factors that may boost reports of self-esteem earlier in life. Troll and Skaff (1997) looked into perceived continuity of self in very old age. Using measures of self and well-being, they reached an important conclusion that correlated with the data of narratives studies that will be presented here. According to their findings, in spite of life threatening events and health constraints related to old age, most people felt that they stayed the same and did not change much. Small changes were detected that were mainly positive and were attributed to long-term developments. Scannell, Allen and Burton (2002) examined the relationships between meaning in life and personal well-being, using measures of well-being and measures for meaning that contained affective and cognitive subscales. They found relationships between meanings and a positive sense of well-being. Meaning was related to a sense of happiness and spirituality. Depression was found to be negatively correlated to meanings. Also, social relationships were one of the more powerful indicators of a sense of meaning and thus of a sense of well-being. Cohen and Bearison (1987) looked at the influence of age and the structure of the social environment on the interpersonal understanding of elderly people. Their findings showed that elderly people living in age integrated housing showed a higher ability of interpersonal understanding than elderly people living in age segregated communities. The authors suggested

that in light of the importance of interpersonal understating in adjusting to massive life changes experienced by the elderly, the quality and diversity of interpersonal interaction were important factors in quality of life of the elderly and should be considered when designing housing and centers for the elderly.

Silver (1992) analyzed different styles of aging and their relations to personality characteristics. Using five personality constructs, she showed how individual cognitive strategies and defense mechanisms continued to play a major role in one's behavior over time. Needs, goals and constraints of old age were met with the strengths developed through the years. However, as old age posed different objectives and obstacles, coping strategies of younger ages were not necessarily helpful to elders. Coping mechanisms of a much earlier stage, that were associated with immature development and were geared towards getting attention and affection from the surroundings to increase chances of survival, proved to be more efficient in late life, compared to the more mature and adult like strategies.

Happe, Winner and Brownell (1998) studied theory of mind in normal aging. They found that performance on theory of mind tasks remained intact and even improved over the later adult years. Bradley and Cafferty (2001) studied attachment among older adults and concluded that secure attachment styles could predict better adjustment in older age.

Although the intentions of researchers are often good, much gerontological research and practice incorporates social values that are in themselves responsible for ageism and the declining status of old age. When that happens, it fails many times to help its target and, mistakenly, uses inadequate norms and underlying assumptions, which are driven more by society's needs than by the needs of the elderly.

Successful aging through empirical lenses.

As was mentioned earlier, the underlying assumption in most studies that define and explore the components of successful aging is that old age is a time of decline, loss and deterioration. The interest of researchers is to determine how this period can be more successful (i.e., less identified with decline). The social applications of this approach are to find ways to help the growing population of individuals over 70 look forward to a better, more positive future. Successful aging is when aged individuals seem not so old and can attribute to themselves a repertoire of activities and aspirations that fit societal norms of youth. Accordingly, meaning is defined as well-being and satisfaction and, therefore, researchers seek to identify the factors that lower or enhance feelings of well-being and general positive attitudes towards life. The logical inference is that a sense of well-being and satisfaction indicates successful aging. The hidden agenda is to boil down the factors and variables which help old people in our society overcome the very essence of their existence: growing old.

Scannel, Allen and Burton (2002) examined cognitive, affective and behavioral measures of meaning in life and compared them to measures of well-being. Five measures were used:

1. The happiness index: Two questions on a four point scale; “To what extent do you regard yourself as a happy person?” and “How satisfied are you with your present life?”

2. The life regard index: 28 items that comprised two subscales: framework and fulfillment. The index contained statements like “I have really come to terms with what’s important for me in my life” and “Nothing very outstanding ever seems to happen to me.”

3. The mental, physical and spiritual well-being scale: 30 items, ten for each subscale that included items such as “Do you engage in games which are designed for mental stimulation (e.g., bridge, chess etc.), “Over the past year, have you experienced aches and pains?” and “Over

the past year, have you tried to enhance your personal or spiritual development (meditation, yoga, praying, etc.)?”

4. The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory: 25 negative and positive items that refer to self-evaluation of worthiness, approval, competence, success and significance.

5. The brief symptom inventory: 53 statements about psychological symptoms.

They found that high scores on positive measures of well-being predicted high scores on cognitive and affective meanings in life. However, well-being was influenced by different factors. Moreover, life could have meaning even when suffering from all kind of miseries.

Nygern, Alex, Jonsen, Gustafson, Norberg and Lundman (2005) used measures of resilience, sense of coherence, purpose in life and self-transcendence in order to understand perceptions of well-being by their elderly participants. They found a strong correlation between the different measures and assumed that they can be counted for a measure of internal strength. Older old and younger old people did not differ significantly on scores for these measures nor was the physical health measure correlated to the other measures. Ardel (2005) examined measures of well-being and their relation to religiosity, fear of death and purpose in life. As control variables, she looked at subjective health, closeness to death (hospice patients) and nursing home residency. Ardel found that a sense of purpose in life was correlated to an improved sense of well-being and reduced fear of death beyond the health status and residency.

Old Age as Embedded in Cultural and Social Relations

Jung's quote on old age reflects the search for meaning in old age by the individual and society:

A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species. The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own and cannot be merely a pitiful appendage to life's morning. (1978, p. 142)

The functional importance of different manifestations of human existence is dealt with in many aspects of research. A major part of investigating old age is looking at the interaction between old age and society. The way a specific society constructs the attitudes, symbols and practices of old age and, conversely, the ways people defined as old, accept, resent or resist their assigned role and place. Macro developmental and social changes between and within societies are depicted in the micro experiences of its individuals as well as in the organization and construction of its institutions. Disengagement theory, for example, was generated in an academic atmosphere within psychology that sought to reveal grand theory explanations similar to those that governed the biological world (Maddox, 1994). The idea that society operates according to basic functionalistic principles was, by large, a favored approach. At a time when productivity and independence marked the development and success of Western societies, old age seemed complicated and hard to accept; it seemed rational to have dual mechanisms within society and within the individual that worked towards the same solution: a respectful departure from each other. Efforts to come up with a different, almost spiritual explanation, like Tornstam's gerotranscendence theory (2005), depicted changes in underlying social occurrences. In general, our society at all levels — artistic and cultural, legislated and implemented, private and public, personal and collective — struggles with the extremes of perception about the elderly. Old people are simultaneously seen as the source of wisdom, knowledge and mystical power and, at the same time, as weak, repulsive and unwanted. Classic stories told of old people

sent away to die on the ice or in the forest, still resonate with the modern reader. Ancient Greece, apparently, struggled with these extremes as well: Youth was sweet, beautiful and heroic; old age was ugly, mean and tragic. However, for ancient Sparta, the elevated status of old people was constituted by law and they enjoyed a place of respect as advisers and counselors (Chris, 2007). In modern-day Ghana, old people are respected but also feared and envied by other segments of society. Elders are respected because they possess a treasure of accumulated knowledge that is not easily replaced by other means. This knowledge allows them to predict future events and to provide valuable advice to others. Old people are feared because they are also known to possess evil knowledge; they can cast a spell and bring about destruction. In a society where death is still associated with infancy and youth, the fact that these elders are still alive is a source of envy, suspicion and speculation regarding the magic, dark power they possess (Van der Geest, 2002).

Biggs (2001) identified changes in the aging social narrative; mainly a shift from the dependent, in need of societal resources to survive, to the active, volunteer who contributes to society from his or her wealth and experience. Biggs considered the shift to be positive, as it removed the needy, fragile and spiteful edge of the elderly. However, the two extremes do not allow for a third and fourth image of elderly people to be part of the consensus. As a consequence, the policy planners and the channels for interventions are in favor of and limited to the elders who best fit the current image of the elderly. Biggs and Powell (2001) examined the social welfare construction of old age and from there, the distribution of power and wealth. The danger, according to the authors, came from creating a limited and biased construction of the elderly person and his or her needs and, then, applying these images in a hard to reverse way:

If they are not careful, both professionals and users of health and welfare systems become trapped in a dance of mutually maintained positions that serves to sustain a particular view of aging and the remedies and the technologies that can be brought to bear on it. (p. 7)

Moody (1986, 1995) looked at possible societal scenarios for old age, the ways in which society prepared for them and what they meant, collectively, to old people. His analysis considered the appeal of medical developments in life extension, as well as the nature of societal resources that needed to be directed towards old age. In one scenario, there is a fearful prediction that was described in literature by Saramago (2008): what happens in a society when people don't die but linger on and on with the aids of medical technologies. The consequences in Saramago's book are potentially devastating, ranging from a large number of unwanted old immigrants seeking to extend their life span, to the formation of a new industry that moves people across the border so that they can die. The social order is disturbed and people pray for death to come again. In the opposite scenario, society accepts the limitations of life and uses its resources to arrange for a comfortable death for those who are sick and weak. Meaning of age and allocation of money might look very different from these opposite ends of the spectrum. Powell (2005) described a top down model in which images of old age changed according to social needs and different policy positions. The changes then trickled down to families that were asked to take different roles in caring for their elderly members. Martinson and Minkler (2006) looked at how policy makers were able to promote or silence ways of aging. They emphasized how the two different approaches to old age — as a potential force in economics and politics, as opposed to a declining fragment of society — rob the elderly of a humanistic opportunity for freedom of choice. The images constructed from a top down model are often quick to enter

people's hearts but slow to leave them, spreading and reinforcing the negative attitudes toward the targeted population. Bearon (1996) suggested a two tiered approach to successful aging: one for the healthier old person and one for the frailer one. Tornstam (1992) claimed that, in many cases, gerontological research failed to distinct between theories that developed out of the empirical realm and theories that developed as a product of societal attitudes about the elderly population. In his view, this confusion compromised gerontological research. Tornstam provided an example of two perspectives towards the elderly that basically mirror each other; each is a product of societal biases and a leading force in directing research and explaining findings. The misery perspective was born out of the conflict between two contradictory views: one was the social contempt of Western society towards its unproductive members, in which the elderly were a significant component and the other was the deeply rooted societal notion of respect for the elderly. The result of this conflict was that contempt turned into misery and pity was allowed to enter the picture. The mirror image of this depiction of old people is the resource perspective. In this perspective, elderly people are perceived and appreciated only in terms of their ability to continue and contribute to society. They are viewed as resources that can still be active and contributing in the appropriate circles. This approach is no less ruthless than the misery perspective in the demands put upon old people to continue and perform. According to Tornstam (1992), feelings of pity on one side and pressure to maintain an active lifestyle on the other, interfere in theory development, studies' goals and interpretation of findings.

Silver (1992, 2003) presented the psychoanalytic perspective by which individuals in Western societies disassociate themselves from the fear of growing old and dying by projecting their fears on to elderly people. As old people become the target for animosity and repulsion, the fear of aging and death is being suppressed. After all, these things are happening to people who

are so different from us. Fear of death is the motivator that influences the way some societies treat their elders and, also, how these same approaches inform the personal attitudes, fears and self-perceptions of the elders themselves. Vincent (2003, 2006) and Witkin (1999) explained how modern medical practices built on the fear of death, transforming old age from a natural event to a disease: “Successful old age is not seen as it was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as the outcome of a moral life but, rather, as the absence of disease” (2003, p. 138). Within a culture that promotes science and control over nature as the ultimate successes, old age will always be considered as a failure, a consequence of lack of means that, with the proper research and progress, should be eliminated.

Negative attitudes towards and stereotypes of old people.

Traditionally, old people in anthropological research play the role of informers and helpers. They are considered the ones who hold valuable access into societal secrets. As veteran members, they are entrusted with knowledge about the comings and goings of societal arrangements and organizations and with anecdotes and subtle nuances. Gaining understanding about old people’s lives can come from the actors themselves, as they talk about their lives. From a cultural perspective, analyzing the roles of elderly people as they are molded and evolved in response to specific needs and conditions, completes the circle. Whether created by choice or by lack of choice, enclosed groups of older people (e.g., those in nursing homes, day centers) can also be a target for research that seeks to understand the demands placed upon on aging people.

Hazan (1984, 1992, 1994, 2000) analyzed old age as a social phenomenon in an anthropological framework. In doing so, he considered society’s values and stereotypes, its social structures and social relationships and the impact of historical events. Hazan collected his data in day centers and nursing homes for old people using a phenomenological research method.

Hazan's stance is clear and unmistakable. From the language used to describe old people through the social structure, the mechanisms and resources in society, its values and stereotypes and the awkward meaning we give to age — all led Hazan to conclude: The old are seemingly neglected, maltreated and robbed of their natural rights. It's both a wonder and a tribute to human nature that they strive to find meaning in a world they have very little control over:

The term "aged" not only describes individuals but also is used as a collective noun and once individuals are identified as "old", they are perceived exclusively as such. Even the alternative terms, sometimes, are used to soften the negative connotations of the word 'old' — "the elderly," "older person," "senior citizen," "elders" or "old age pensioners" — all serve to stigmatize the aged. (1994, p. 13)

According to Hazan, the only generalization one can make about old people is that the amount of years they have left to live is smaller than the amount they already lived. When looking from the point of view of society, aging and the old are stigmatized negatively. Aging is perceived in our society as a problem, a burden and a social issue that needs to be solved.

Thomas (2004) saw ageism, fear and hatred of old age, stereotypical thinking and negative attitudes towards old age and old people as the direct product of, what he referred to as, the vast influence and tyranny among the "cult of adults." Adulthood is considered to be the essence and aspiration of human's race. With their strong inclinations towards productivity, independence, control and profit, adults are hailed as the crown of human existence. To become an adult is to reach the peak of development. Anything before adulthood is just preparation and anything after that is decline and death. Adulthood is where one wants to get to and where one wants to stay forever. The values implied by the cult of adulthood are responsible, according to Thomas, for the desperate efforts of society — and its elder members, in particular — to stay

young, productive, healthy and to maintain a life style at old age that is as similar as possible to adulthood at its prime. The tyranny of the cult of adults is also responsible for putting heavy pressure on children's socialization so that they acquire the skills needed to reach adulthood as soon as possible.

Hirshbein (2001) studied the popular views of old age in America between 1900 and 1950. His data was collected from articles that appeared in popular magazines of the time that dealt with aging and elderly people. He found that, when writing about their lives, old people concentrated on aspects that were not necessarily age related. However, medical experts, social workers and psychologists concentrated mainly on pathological aspects of aging. Positioning aging as a problem automatically creates a dichotomy that puts middle-aged and younger people on one side and the elderly on the other, as if they no longer share the same societal structure. At best, old people are seen as the part of society that populates the borders; they are to be pushed aside, circled and marked. That is not to say that there is a dearth of private, government and social structures dedicated to helping the elderly. To the contrary, many efforts are directed towards helping the ever-growing elder population lead better lives. It's just that during these processes, stereotypes, prejudices and well-intentioned mistakes block us from a clear perspective on problems and possible solutions.

Hazan (1984, 1994) began his analysis by exploring the confusion that exists at the level of definitions. An old person can be defined as someone who feels himself to be old — a problematic definition because most people do not see themselves as old, unless they refer to age-related health issues. In reviewing a large body of research, Eisenhandler (1986) concluded that old people do not generally perceive themselves to be old nor do they call themselves old. Research that tried to establish a correlation between chronological age and perceived age

indicated that old people perceive themselves as younger than their chronological age. One explanation for these findings is the denial, on the part of the elderly, of the stigmatization of old age. Another explanation is a lack of relevant identity in being old; younger people do not have an arsenal of past experiences they can use when trying to understand what it means to be old. In a scientific definition, old people might be defined as those who possess a set of specific properties that can be identified and measured — a definition that could draw its support from measures outside of individual observations. A bureaucratic definition will label an individual as an old person once he reached a certain age; social justice perspectives will see the elderly group as a minority who needs to organize, unite and fight for their rights.

Many of the assumptions and directions regarding old age are rooted in a complex web of stereotypes and ambiguous social roles assigned to old people. Stereotypes of old people in our society gain strength from the confusing nature of the old group. Taken as a group, old people do not have clear and specific identifying marks and their social roles are almost nonexistent. Therefore, the use of stereotypes becomes a powerful tool in forming and directing our attitudes and behaviors towards them.

Hazan (1994, 1984, 2000), supported by others (Decalmer and Glendenning, 1997; Green, 1984; Hummert, 1993; Kite and Johnson, 1988; Sik Hung and McCreanor, 1999; Nuland, 2007; Schulz and Fritz, 1987; Thomas, 2004), lists Western societal stereotypes that are attributed to old people. One of the most rooted stereotypes depicts old people as inflexible and conservative. Old people are perceived as individuals who no longer have the interest or ability to invent, create and grow. They are perceived as individuals with intellectual deficiencies and who lack the ability to learn new things. This perception of infertility is also expressed in sexual images and attributions. Old people are perceived as a-sexual and if they try to beat this image,

the best they can hope for is to be labeled a “dirty old man.” To add to the ambiguity of old age stereotypes, some characteristics are depicted as dichotomies. In other words, notions of dependency coexist with notions of metaphysical strengths. Old people are perceived as senile even if they do not suffer from any medically recognizable brain disease. They are perceived as having perception, memory and other cognitive function weaknesses that require strict supervision by others. Conversely, society often attributes extraordinary wisdom to old people. According to Hazan(1994), another stereotype is that of old people as weak, perplexed and helpless in facing the demands of the environment in which they live. This stereotype supports the premise that society is responsible for building an environment for its old people in which they will be able to function. Side by side with this image flourishes the image of old people as frightening and scary. The contradiction between the two images is clear. If we perceive someone as being frightening and repulsive, how can she also be depicted as dependent and pitiful? How contradictory and confusing it should be to contain images of dependency and a need to be taken care of, sometimes, on very basic functions of life and, at the same time, be depicted as disgusting and revolting? Most people could, at the very least, imagine changing a baby’s diaper if needed; far fewer would be ready to perform the same service for an old person. Another stereotype depicts old people as living in the past and relying on it to enhance their good feelings about themselves. According to this notion, the past becomes their general motivation to continue their everyday affairs in the present. The way to an old person’s heart would be to make him or her speak about their glorious past. The flip side of this perception is viewing old people as individuals who are interested only in immediate gratification of basic everyday needs. In other words, old people are seen as if they were balancing — or rather, stumbling — between totally different time frames; they are either immersed in the past or obsessed with the present.

Additionally, “the future” and “old age” are almost considered taboo to be appearing together. When it comes to the social needs of old people; societal stereotypes cover the full spectrum. On one hand, old people are perceived to be constantly in need of company, especially other old people; on the other hand, they are seen as if they would rather be by themselves, disengaged from the rest of society.

The most extreme stereotype is probably the perception of the general emotional state of the elderly. They are perceived as depressed, unhappy and overwhelmed with a constant sense of failure, disintegration, purposelessness and hopelessness (Hazan, 1994). Here again, the other end of the spectrum depicts old people as reaching a state of calmness, overflowing with philosophical insights that color their lives with a transcendent aura. Research based on these stereotypes has been used to determine applicable societal roles and to establish institutions and mechanisms designed to solve old people’s problems: “If we accept that aged people are surrounded by a society that assigns them false images and that they are therefore trapped in a labyrinth of distorting mirrors, then the question arises of what self-conception they can possibly project” (Hazan, 1994, p. 33).

Another way of understanding society’s biased attitudes towards the old is revealed in analyzing some of the roles that Western society assigns to old people. New roles are necessary to replace the old roles that are no longer appropriate or relevant to the individual’s life. The parent’s role as a provider of physical and emotional needs and as an agent of socialization fades as children grow older. The role of the worker as a contributor to the economic system of society comes to an end. These roles are replaced by the role of the retired, a popular role assigned to old people, one which originates primarily from the assumption that old people should fill their time with a variety of leisure activities. Arts and crafts activities exist in almost

all the centers dedicated to old people. Elders can choose activities that range from paper folding techniques to learning how to knit. Knitting is a particularly powerful cultural image for the elder woman; any self-respecting old lady is expected to knit. Tornstam (1992), regarding the issue of retirement, claimed that a vast amount of theory and research is centered on the devastating effects of retirement, even though a critical look at the various results reveals a more diverse picture. Apparently, retirement can be a rewarding milestone in one's life.

An even stronger, almost moralistic role is that of the grandparent. Grand parenting is, supposedly, as fundamental and important as parenting. There is the presumption that all grandparents love their grandchildren and wish to spend as much time as possible with them. Ironically, they are supposed to fill this role, gladly, without having a real say in the decisions that are made about their grandchildren.

Another role is the role of the sick person or patient. Although it's true that many people suffer from more physical pathologies in their old age than in their youth and adulthood, the role of the patient in old age is assumed to be constantly afflicted by diseases, sicknesses and poor functioning. This role comes with the possibility of secondary rewards; however, it also alienates the old person from his or her environment and in a terminal manner. While a younger patient is disconnected from the social environment on a temporary basis, for the old patient, this disconnection is final (Hazan, 1994).

A more positive role is the role of the volunteer. This role is assigned to old people who wish to be identified with activity and productivity, who wish to take part in the social doing, adding to their social status via integration and contribution. Their reward is the good deed; sometimes a ceremonial title of honor is thrown in as well. Some seniors, especially those who retire from high status positions, get to be advisers or consultants. For Hazan (2004), an

important advantage in recognizing some of these stereotypes and notions is its preventative powers. Services, institutions and activity groups offered to old people can use this knowledge when determining best procedures and practices. Shmotkin and Blumstein (2003) looked at volunteering activities from the view point of the elderly volunteer. They examined the benefits of formal volunteering in comparison to other life style activities. Formal volunteering was defined as voluntary activities performed on behalf of nonprofit organizations that were involved in various helping and charity projects. The authors found that, for their elderly participants, volunteering was connected to better scores on psychological functioning and reduced mortality risks.

Sik Hung and McCreanor (1999) depicted a more balanced view of the elderly and old age. In a survey that analyzed discourse patterns about old age, three main findings emerged:

1. The majority of the discourse represented the strong belief that society is responsible for the old and should protect its elderly with respect to their contribution to society.

2. A second discourse emphasized anti-ageism ideas. In this discourse, participants were aware of the stereotypes that were inflicted on old people and expressed the need to resist and change them. It should be noted that this kind of righteous discourse, often, tended towards overprotection and paternalism, regarding old age as one undifferentiated group, led to stereotyping.

3. The third emergent discourse talked about old age and old people as a resource of experience and knowledge that should be used by society.

To sum up an important observation, there is not really one dominant voice of society. This is especially true for the past decade; we have witnessed enormous growth and diversity in plans, attitudes and research about old age. Rather than one singular voice, there is medley of

policy, organization, medical advancement, demographics and societal attitudes that keeps changing. According to Bruner (1999):

Most cultures, one might suspect, have on offer narratives that both denigrate aging and that honor or enable it. Which genre, any particular individual in any particular culture, adopts as a template for his own life story is partly a function of social position and partly a function of luck. (p. 3)

Meanings Before Predictions

An observation of Jung (1978) highlights the importance of discovering meaning as an important source of psychological knowledge:

Anyone who wants to know the human psyche will learn next to nothing from experimental psychology. He would be better advised to abandon exact science, put away his scholar's gown, bid farewell to his study and wander with human heart through the world. There, in the horrors of prisons, lunatic asylums and hospitals, in drab suburban pubs, in brothels and gambling-hells, in the salons of the elegant, the Stock Exchanges, socialist meetings, churches, revivalist gatherings and ecstatic sects, through love and hate, through the experience of passion in every form in his own body, he would reap richer stores of knowledge than text-books a foot thick could give him and he will know how to doctor the sick with a real knowledge of the human soul. (p. 81)

The narrative/qualitative paradigm in social studies tries to encompass these principles and to reach the heart and mind of its participants through their own voices.

Narratives: What's the story?

In narratives, researchers relate first and foremost to data that is presented in the voice and words of the research participants. Whether gathered through structured interviews, open-

ended interviews, written assignments or archival materials (e.g., documents and video clips), the basic unit of analysis is the product of ordinary people's discourse. Their interpretations of the world; their lives, their arts, their school district, their pain or their gardening methods — and always in their own words and ways of telling — is the data at hand. As Bearison (2006) stated:

Such approaches rest on the premise that it is best to understand people (and how they behave) on their own terms instead of posing a priori hypotheses and analytic presuppositions, as is common in more traditional positivistic methods of studying human behavior. (p. 21)

And when talking about the importance of storytelling, Bruner (1990) stated, “This method of negotiating and renegotiating meanings by the mediation of narrative interpretation is, it seems to me, one of the crowning achievements of human development in the ontogenic, cultural and phylogenetic senses of that expression” (p. 67). For Bruner (1990, 2002), not only is this the most authentic way to understand people's behavior and motives, it is also a fundamental human quality, one that is presented early in development, when a child is being brought to understand its surroundings through talking about them in a story-telling form (Nelson, 1993).

Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), Chase (2008), Eide and Kahn (2008) and Gubrium and Sankar (1994) stressed also that the overarching assumption of qualitative studies is that people know things about their own lives, about themselves and about other people. Qualitative research captures the multifaceted and complex nature of human experience from the perspective of the individual. One clear strength of qualitative research is its mission to identify, represent and explain the meaning of the researched phenomenon from the viewpoint of the actor with his or her own words. Narratives are used to get access to data that is closer to actual experiences.

While stories are most often used in connection with life history and biography, narratives embrace data collection that builds on interviews, open-ended questions, written reactions and analysis of speech parts and linguistic expressions. This collection of methods allows the individual voice to be heard in all its complexity and idiosyncrasy; from lengthy biographies to short accounts on specific issues. Wallace, in Gubrium and Sankar (1994), distinguished between life stories that are the partial or complete narrative accounts of a person's life, that are shared orally by the person himself or herself and, life stories that are constructed from archival materials like personal documents, diaries, letters, etc. Although life stories usually offer subjective interpretations by the narrators about their lives, they can also be analyzed from a social and cultural perspective, providing access to world of meanings that the individual story has embedded within it. Narrative research indicates an inclusive, systematic way of creating the life story of an individual (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003; Chase, 2008; Gubrium and Sankar, 1994; Higgs, 1999). This approach is especially useful when studying lives of elderly people because it gives voice to a minority group that is at risk of losing their unique place when positioned against normative and objective measures (Fischer in Gubrium and Sankar (1994).

If the image of a researcher analyzing quantitative data is that of a gravely serious scientist in a sparkling clean laboratory, wearing a white coat and surrounded by tables, computers and numbers, then the qualitative researcher might be the image of a person drowning in papers, notebooks and slips of paper, covered with words, who keeps repeating phrases and waiting impatiently for an insight that will miraculously bring everything together. From the chaos of fragmented ideas, multi-media illustrations and piles of papers, a coherent picture will emerge.

In the various discussions on the differences between quantitative and qualitative analysis, one aspect stands out as a prominent distinction. Quantitative analysis strives to achieve an objectivity that will strengthen its reliability and validity and that will allow a greater range of generalization. One of the ways to achieve objectivity is by trying to diminish the individuality of the data as much as possible. The philosophy of qualitative research implies that the individuality of the researcher — his or her thoughts, ideas, feelings, ways of thinking and looking at the world — is a most important tool in interpreting data. In that sense, an essential part of the data analysis is the demonstration of how the data supports the researcher's interpretations. There is no formal statistical test that will judge the accuracy of the results or its power to predict future events nor will any statistical test supply criteria for generalization. Instead, the reader of the text is one of many anonymous evaluators that are judging if the story holds meaning to them.

When comparing with quantitative methods of inquiry, Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) suggested the term justifiability instead of reliability and validity; they stated:

It is justifiable, even inevitable for a researcher to use his subjectivity in analyzing and interpreting data. However, it is not justifiable for him to impose his own subjectivity in an arbitrary manner. That is in a way that is not grounded in the data. Unjustifiable use of subjectivity is, in effect, interpreting data based on the researcher's prejudices and biases without regard to the participants' experience. (p. 82-83)

As the focus moves from objective measures to the subjective interpretation of the individual researcher, the task of the researcher becomes more demanding. Auerbach and

Silverstein (2003) referenced three mechanisms to evaluate the justifiability of the data for oneself and other readers. These mechanisms are:

1. Transparency. The ability of other researchers or readers to see and understand the steps that were taken in analyzing the data and how they lead to the specific interpretations and conclusions. This does not mean that others should agree with the final shape of the results but they should be able to understand how those results came to be what they are.

2. Communicability. The themes and constructs should be understood by other researchers and, more than that, by the participants themselves whose thoughts, ideas feelings and experiences created these concepts.

3. Coherence. The theoretical constructs should fit together and allow for a coherent story to emerge in the data.

About authenticity.

Stories can be told in many ways. The same story may have more than one ending, more than one beginning and many points of importance along the way. A story can be changed over time, even when told by the same narrator to the same audience. In an objective world of data, this quality is problematic. In the realm of qualitative/narrative inquiry, it becomes a point of strength and advantage that might teach us more than we imagined.

Andrews (2007) discussed the challenges of being involved in narrative research: who we are and how we are perceived to be when we present ourselves as researchers to the people to whom we talk, what they understand about us and our goals and how this understanding influences their story. An example of such influence was reported by Spector-Mersel (2008). Spector-Mersel elicited stories from former high ranking officers in the Israeli defense army. Her participants believed they were being asked to portray a time in history, a country in need and the

heroism of the ones who stayed in its service for most of their lives. Accordingly, they tried to silence, flatten and put aside parts of the story they felt did not match this mission.

In a similar way, Polkinghorne (2007) stated: “The threats particular to narrative research relate to two areas: the differences in people’s experienced meaning and the stories they tell about this meaning and the connections between stories texts and the interpretations of those texts” (p. 471).

The endeavor of representing a studied phenomenon in research tools that, at best, can represent only part of the phenomenon is one of the main challenges in social research. And at times, the most one can do is acknowledge that fact.

Open interview.

The most popular tool for eliciting narratives in a qualitative research paradigm is the interview. Rapley (2007) described the nature of interviewing as being the everyday habit of asking and answering questions. In the process of this exchange, the interests and characteristics of the people involved are evolving and changing: “Interviews are, by their very nature, social encounters, where speakers collaborate in producing retrospective (and prospective) accounts or versions of their past (or future) actions, expectations, feelings and thoughts” (p.16). However, the information gathered from interviews can also be seen and analyzed in two major ways: (a) as a reflection of the reality of the interviewee outside of the interview and (b) as a reality that is collaboratively constructed by the interviewee and interviewer. Widdershoven (2005) discussed the interaction between stories and the lives they were supposed to represent. One component of the interaction has to do with the ways that the story reveals hidden aspects of life on one hand and enables change and development on the other hand.

Narratives in old age research.

The third stream of thought that directs this research is positioned as a reaction to the formal theories and objective knowledge that deals mainly with depicting the world of the elderly from the point of view of society. In sharp contrast to the view of aging as a phenomenon to be understood within the arena of cultural meanings, social relations and social practices, is the view that the meaning of aging is to be found in individual subjectivity (Carson, 1986). Narrative researches focus on the experiences and meanings of old age through the voices of the actors themselves; the way they experience and express how it is to be themselves at a certain age (Gubrium and Sankar, 1999). Instead of measuring different skills and performances and comparing them to age norms, this kind of research tries to uncover the specifics of everyday life, activities, thoughts and feelings as they are experienced and reported by the elderly. The qualitative methods used, (e.g., in-depth interviews, open-ended questions and a variety of other techniques), produce a model that can express meaning and stand for itself without, necessarily, having to rely on correlations that come from different forms of data.

Steffen (1997) emphasized the importance of the individual story in understanding general social relations and cultural values. The main reason for telling an individual story in social study is its potential to illuminate general cultural phenomena and this illumination can, hopefully, prepare the ground for societal change. Thomas (2004) foresaw a utopian future in which a main role of the elder individuals would be to tell stories about their lives, their experiences, their actions and thoughts:

...Stories that remind us to be kind to one another, stories that tell us to be wary of strangers, stories that prod us to welcome strangers, stories that reveal dimensions of good and evil-these are the instruments of culture, not the culture itself. (p. 294)

Another important aspect of elder research is the researcher's own life stage. Most researchers, while having some personal experiences in other stages of life, have not yet reached old age and even if they have reached it, chronologically, their productivity proves that they have not reached old age socially. Higgs (1999) indicated:

Increasing sociologists and gerontologists have to turn to questions of identity and personal narratives in order to understand how individuals understand their lives and what they see their concern to be; nowhere is this truer than in the study of old age. (p. 197)

Erikson (1986) conducted a longitudinal study and elicited narratives from elderly people that were analyzed through the guidelines of Erikson's theory. Kaufman (1986, 1993), who was one of the first to conduct a thorough study on the narratives of old people, stated that in order to ensure a quality of life for the elderly population, one must know what it means to be old and that this knowledge could only come directly from the voices of the elderly. In her study, Kaufman sampled 15 stories out of 60 stories that were elicited from individuals who shared some cultural values and ways of life but who differed in their socioeconomic situations. She purposely did not ask for a life history or an account of a full story but talked freely with her participants on several life issues. Kaufman's inquiry touched upon the following domains:

Life events: What are your earliest memories? Tell me about your children?

Life review: What do you feel have been the important successes in your life? The frustrations? What were the important turning points in your life?

Identity: What do you see when you look in the mirror? How are you like/unlike your mother? How are you like/unlike your father?

Aging: How can one prepare for old age? How do you feel about growing old now?

Kaufman spent a lot of time with her participants in several meeting places; she built a case of their story, incorporating segments from semi-formal interviews and casual encounters in their natural milieu. Through her data analysis, Kaufman came to view the lives of her participants by the cultural themes that represented them. Themes like affective ties, marriage, acquiescence and self-determination, were identified and explained as valid in giving meaning to a particular life. One of Kaufman's main findings was the construction of the ageless self, a term she used to explain: (1) the ability and necessity of old people to arrange their lives around a continuity of the self in a changing world and (2) how, by doing so, they enable themselves to go through painful transformations. Kaufman concluded:

The key here is integration; this is the heart of the creative, symbolic process of self-formulation in late life. If we can find the sources of meaning held by the elderly and see how individuals put it all together, we will go a long way toward appreciating the complexity of human aging and the ultimate reality of coming to terms with one's whole life. (1986, p. 188)

Koch (2000) provided a similarly broad spectrum in presenting the narratives of 11 elderly people who were battling, each in his or her unique way, to carve a place for themselves in a rapidly changing reality, afflicted by fragility, sickness and loss but, also, marked by courage, humor and creativity. Koch's mission was to show how different were the dynamic, evolving and rich life narratives from society's fears and misjudgment of its elderly. Koch reminded his readers to "respect your elders" and, by doing so, to appreciate the humanity in all of us. There is no doubt that Koch's heroes, even the ones who seemed to live in physical and social neglect and who spent their days in solitary drinking, came out of his description as

complete persons. They were people whose choices, although many times overruled by society's agents, should be respected.

Rohovit (2000), Thompson (1993), Kahn (1990), Eisenhandler (1986) and Connors (1986), also, conducted research of older people's lives as revealed through their voices. Their work represents researchers who position themselves as advocates for a segment in society that is perceived to be in need of protection, if not from its own fate, then from that which society might impose on it. Like Kaufman (1986) and Koch (2000) they emerged from their work admiring their participants and wishing to spread the word that, boiled down to its essence, might read: We were there. We learned from them. We talked to them. They are great. They are courageous. They are funny, they are sad, they are pathetic. They are human.

Rohovit (2000), who titled her work "*Gray Matters*" - *Re-visioning Women's Meaning and Experience of Old Age* summed up the common agenda: "This project emerged from a concern that existing popular and scientific conceptual schemes may not fully or accurately capture older persons' phenomenological experience and, subsequently, counseling theory and practice may not be responsive to their needs and concerns" (p. iv).

Rohovit interviewed ten women about the broad scope of their lives, ranging from everyday details to questions that touched upon the experience and meaning of age, experiences of life in the present, as compared to memories of the past, and thoughts about the future. Rohovit's feelings for her participants were captured in one of her concluding remarks:

These alternative narratives give voice to an old age that is an embodied, empowering, existentially intense and relationally embedded experience. In place of the simplified distortions of the geriatric body or the ageless mind, these women bring to life ontology of aging that is dynamically internal and external,

physical and emotional.... In place of narratives that foretell of despair and depression, these women “kind of like being older” and some even embrace the experience of becoming and being older. (p. 189)

Going forward with this agenda, Eisenhandler (1986) entitled her work *The Shibboleth of Old Age*. She stated: “In order to understand the authentic experience of old age it is necessary to listen to the voices of elders as they detail and describe what life is like to them” (p. vi).

Eisenhandler interviewed 50 elderly people ranging from 69 to 92 years of age living in a residential community. In a detailed, semi-structured interview, she depicted the life of her interviewees. Her questions spanned from inquiry on earlier years (marriage, children, work history) to the present “How is it to be in a certain age?” “What does it mean to be old?” “What kind of health and other problems are encountered?” to the future “What do you think it will be like 10 years from now?” “What advice can you give to a younger person about growing older?” One of her main conclusions was that older people do not incorporate aspects of old age into their self-concept, unless, health issues were involved or when interactions with significant others (i.e., children, friends) created a context that brought old age to light. For Eisenhandler, the most encouraging news was that her participants could not and would not accept the claim that they were “the old, those set apart from adulthood, confined to a developmental stage where adults become infant-like with no identity distinct from that conferred by biologically based progression or through the responses of younger adults” (p. 281).

Connors (1986) studied the lives of six New England women in their nineties, investigating their everyday lives and experiences as depicted in their own words. She stated: “I have participated in the research process with these women in order to create a context in which their diversity, uniqueness, strength and potential could emerge” (p. 1). Connors went one step

further in her goals for this study. Choosing women who shared the same ethnicity and social class as herself, she wished to find, through their lives, resolution for issues that bothered her in her own life. Connors made her wish explicit:

Because I fear sickness and don't yet understand death, I looked to these women for clues about being healthy and long lasting. Because I wanted to become connected with my roots I expected to find these women firmly planted on the ground. Because so many women's lives have passed unnoticed, I had a desire to make the invisible visible. (p. 11)

Kahn's (1990) research, entitled *Living in a Nursing Home: Experience of Suffering and Meaning in Old Age*, started from a different stance. Suffering was conceptualized as an experience of a threat to self or personal identity; as such, a nursing home for an aged population was a place where suffering should be looked at. Kahn conducted open ended interviews with 21 nursing home residents. In addition, Kahn collected data by observing the daily activities of the participants, conversing with staff and involving himself in the home events. Whether it was because of the setting — a nursing home for people who could not stay by themselves anymore — or because Kahn was specifically interested in experiences of suffering and the creation of personal meaning in an existence threatened by distress, two main themes emerged from his data. These themes were well summed up in the following metaphors: “going down the hill” and “making the best out of it.” Although Kahn's work seemed to be closer to societal notions about the misery and infirmity of old age, the creation of meaning for his participants succeeded in most cases in taking them beyond their struggling present.

In the belief that objective, quantitative research on old age not only missed the main sources of information but did injustice to its targeted population, Thompson (1993) conducted interviews with elderly people in order to capture their understanding of their own lives in the

past and in the future. As he stated, “It is an unfortunate paradox that the energy, which social science researchers have put into documenting the social problems and deprivations of older people in the present, has reinforced conventional misunderstandings and demeaning attitudes towards the old” (p. 685).

Thompson (1993) considered the balance between concepts of work, leisure, grand parenting, intimate relationships and perceived meaning in old age. His conclusions strengthened his theory that pathological and depressive perceptions of old age, negatively, affected the individual’s place in society and, further, created policies that treated crisis instead of looking at preventive measures. Thompson concluded:

Later life from the inside — like life at any age — is a story with its dark side, its pain and suffering. But the message which comes most strongly from these accounts is of resilience in the face of the twists of fate; of adaptability; and in some of these lives, of a powerfully continuing ability to seize or create chances for fulfillment whether in work, leisure or love. (p. 690)

Heikkinen (2004) interviewed and analyzed narratives of 20 aging men and women for 10 years, starting when they were 80 and continuing through the decade to the 10 who lived to be 90 years old. The stories detailed the richness of lives embedded in society and culture and depicted the changes in the participants’ perceived aging over time. Borglin, Edberg and Hallberg (2005) conducted in depth interviews with six women and five men of 80 years and older, who were still living in their own homes, to explore their experiences of quality of life and what it meant to them. The analysis of the participants’ narratives showed that an ability to adjust to life in the face of uncontrolled changes, without losing their self-image, self-esteem and meaning, was the main factor that determined the perception of life’s value. Hinck (2004)

elicited the experiences of 19 adults living alone in their homes, between the ages of 85-98 — an age range that is also referred to as the oldest old. One of the unique components of her study was the advanced age of the participants. Another component was their residency in a rural part of the country, which limited the amount of outside interactions and activities that were available to them. Hinck conducted her study from a medical perspective and, therefore, emphasized issues of health, care and treatment and the everyday needs of an aging body. She found the tenacity of her participants in dealing with these issues to be their main strength. Values of mutual aid, family ties and a strong sense of self were the major aspects in their lives. Staying in one's own home was perceived as a victory and a source for their strength.

A logical path to looking at old age is through the experience of the aging body. Allert and Sponholtz (1994) looked at the meaning of old age through the lenses of chronic disease, where health condition took a chronic form. They concluded that: “In contrast to biological deficiency models, the story concept acknowledges that the individual's personal narrative is a source of integrity and identity, which is the object of personal respect and dignity” (p. 13). Similar approaches and conclusions were reported by Grenier (2006) and Black (2006). Black conducted a study that explored elders' (80 and over) experiences of suffering. Suffering was the main theme of his study and he found that asking directly about experiences of suffering evoked expressions of sadness and despair. However, the ability to weave current suffering throughout a larger life story and to find the resources within one's story to recover a sense of completeness and meaning was, strongly, present in the responses of his participants.

Ward-Baker (2005), interested in what can be learned about living a “good and successful old age,” interviewed four men and four women between the ages of 85 and 100. For

her, the rich, creative and interesting lives that were revealed through the participants' stories should reframe old age:

[Their stories] exemplify a way of being that offers a new dynamic, rewarding image of late life. This way of being is sustained by an evolving sense of self, a feeling of sturdy inner resources and of further work to do. Taken together, these factors suggest a pattern of ongoing development. (p. 243)

Bruner (1999) summed up the importance of "life telling" for aging people. They have lived a long life that, when transformed into a story, can then be continued, developed and evolved in order to make sense of their future.

The Purpose of the Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to elicit narratives of elderly people regarding the experiences and meanings of their lives. At the same time, I wanted to try and capture the voice of society; society's values, thoughts and emotions about old age, as well as society's perceptions of older people, as they were represented in the narratives of younger people who had some personal contact with older people by kinship or friendship. I considered how the different stories developed, where they intertwined and where they differed, what influence they had on each other and what they told us about old age in our time and in our communities. I wanted to capture the experiences of elderly people, their thoughts and ideas about their lives but, also, the experience of old age as it is formed, understood and interpreted in the minds of others close to the elderly. I collected narratives of elderly people talking about their lives and, at the same time, found out what the people close to them, whether a son or daughter or friend, could tell me about the life of their elderly parent or friend. By doing so, I hope I gained entry to the personal meanings of individuals regarding their own old age and the way those close to them perceive and understand these meanings.

The studies cited here depict an obvious discrepancy between what is gathered from old people's discourse about their lives and what are society's general impressions of their lives. To complicate the picture, it seems that when talking about their lives without the presence of a researcher and outside the context of an elicited narrative, old people's perceptions of their own lives tended to be more poignant and more somber (Bobbio, 2001; Erikson, 1997). The present study proposed that the fabric of one story, told in three voices, would shed light on a stage of life that was referred to as unavoidable more than anticipated and would provide details on the way these lives were being experienced, retold and perceived. I also hoped to reveal some of the ways society's ideas and general concepts coexisted in and constructed the individual perceptions.

The present study contributes to a growing field that seeks to understand old age from the point of view of the actor. The study captured the tensions between society's views of its elderly and the self-perceptions of the elderly in a unique way. Contrary to existing research on old people's narratives that positions the individual story in confrontation with societal conceptions, the present study positioned individual narratives of the elderly with individual narratives of the people who knew them and represented society's voice. The supposition was that balancing the stories of real people — the elderly participants, with the stories of younger representatives of society, his or her offspring and acquaintance — would yield a deeper understanding of their narratives, one different from the understanding achieved when balancing an individual story with society's stereotypes.

Three voices were elicited in the present study: The voice of the elderly participant (the actor), the voice of a son or a daughter (the offspring) and the voice of a young acquaintance from the last five years (the acquaintance).

Shulman and Sperry (1992), Myers (1988) and Dobson and Dobson (1985) discussed the responsibilities of middle aged offspring towards their aging parents. The "sandwich generation," as

this age group is referred to, must deal, on one hand, with their adolescent children and, on the other, with their aging parents. These two developmental stages — adolescence and old age — have been compared on the basis of their unbalanced qualities, stormy tendencies and the rapid changes they experience in a short period of time. Adult children of aging parents stand at an important crossroad when dealing with their parents' lives. They are major witnesses to their parents' lives. They have experienced their elders as the omnipotent figures that their own lives as babies depended on. They distanced themselves, as much as possible, from these powerful parents when developing their own independence. They grew closer as they formed their own families units. And they see their parents now in their older years while they, slowly, assume their parents' responsibilities in economic issues, household matters and medical procedures. Sometimes, they take upon themselves the full role of caregivers. The offspring standpoint is important when understanding the lives of elderly people in our society. It's emotionally charged but also contains a standpoint where past perceptions, present dealings and future hopes and fears come together to make sense of a life known by its teller so intimately. The voice of the actors' offspring was the second voice in the present study.

The third voice in the present study was the voice of a younger acquaintance of the last five years. This voice was constructed from interviews with acquaintances of the elderly participants. This voice, I believed, could stand for the way the elderly person was perceived as an old person and how he or she represented himself or herself to a younger member of society. Furthermore, the voice of the acquaintance could have shed light on the way the two individuals managed their different positions in life and how they contained their intimate knowledge of each other with society's expectations.

Research questions.

Following carefully suggested guidelines (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003; Braun and Clarke 2006; Richards 2005; Shkedi, 2003), a thematic analysis of the narrative gathered from the three groups of participants was performed to inform the following questions:

1) What are the practices and meanings of “being old” in urban New York at the present time? How can these meanings inform us about the place of aging in our cultural discourses?

2) How do the perspectives of the actor, the actor’s offspring and the actor’s acquaintance resemble and differ from each other? What is the meaning of the different or similar approaches to old age? How do the different stories inform, enable and constrain each other? What do these three voices tell us about the place of aging in people’s hearts?

3) What are the similarities and differences within each group of participants,(i.e., actor, actor’s offspring and actor’s acquaintances)? What do these similarities and differences tell us about the cultural narratives on aging?

4) How are the societal images of old age depicted in the individual narratives? How do individuals use these images when explaining, contemplating or questioning the stories of the aged actors?

Chapter Two: Method

Participants

Forty five people participated in the present study. Of them, 16 were the main targets of the study, eight men and eight women who lived in their own homes in the New York city area and were 80 years of age and older. For the purposes of the present study, all names and identifying items were changed. These 16 initial participants (also referred to as the actors group) were recruited in four ways:

1. Three participants were referred to me by friends who knew the study's topic.
2. Two participants responded to flyers that were posted in a synagogue and a church (see Appendix A for recruitment flyer.)
3. Six participants were referred by other participants.
4. Five participants responded to an e-mail sent through the Graduate Center mail service.

The second and third groups, offspring and acquaintances, were chosen by the actors group at the initial stages of recruitment. Each elderly participant or actor was asked to choose a son or a daughter and a younger acquaintance who could be interviewed about the actors' lives. One of the 16 actors did not include his offspring or any of his acquaintances in the research and another did not select an acquaintance for participation. The three groups -the elderly participants or actors, the group of offspring and the group of acquaintances- formed 14 triads, one set of two and one solo story.

Data Collection

Initial contact and setting for the interview.

There were two goals to achieve in the first phone contact with potential participants: 1) to ensure potential participants involvement and 2) to explain the conditions of participation, mainly, involving an offspring and an acquaintance in the study. To minimize preliminary biases towards the study, I avoided mentioning the adjective “old” although all recruitment materials asked for people 80 years of age and older. I just mentioned the idea of exploring meaning in life. The informed consent form stated that the goal of the research project was to enhance the understanding of later life by listening to the experiences, perceptions and impressions of individuals who are in the midst of living it.

In this first conversation, I explained to the elderly participants, that I wanted to talk with two other people about their lives. After a couple of tries, I eliminated the part about other people that I needed to interview from the first phone conversation because I found, that the elderly participants were more easily convinced to find two more people to complete their triad, after they had met with me, than when they read about it in a flyer or heard about it during the initial phone call.

Seven out of eight of the interviews with elderly women took place in their homes and one took place in a coffee shop. However, only two out of the eight elderly men’s interviews took place in their homes. The other actors’ interviews were conducted in participants’ offices or at other workspaces (3), a coffee shop (1) or the Graduate Center (2).

After exchanging greetings and engaging in some small talk, I read the consent form to each participant and clarified issues, when necessary. The main part of the interview was designed to elicit the participants’ narrative with as little intervention as possible [see Appendix

C, Interview Protocol C1 for a full list of interview questions of elderly participants). Each actor's interviews started with a general question: "How is life for you these days?" Participants were helped to focus and expand their stories by using clarifications, remarks and questions. The second structured question was what a typical day for them looked like. The third structured question was associated with growing old although the term "old" was not used. The actors were asked how they saw themselves five years from now.

A similar procedure took place for the interviews of the offspring and acquaintances groups (see Appendix C, Interview Protocol C2 for a full list of the interview questions for offspring and acquaintances). The focus of these interviews was the way the offspring and acquaintances perceived the life of the actor. Therefore, they were asked the same questions with the actor as the subject; for example, how they saw their parent or acquaintance in five years from now. Another question was added regarding their ability to help their elderly parent or acquaintance in their daily activities if needed. Offspring and acquaintances were also asked how they imagined themselves to be when they reach their elderly triad member's age.

After this set of questions, all participants were asked to fill in a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix C, for the Demographic Questionnaire C3). In the last part of the interview, the word "old" was used as participants were asked to share their thoughts and feelings about old age in general. The demographic questionnaire was presented between the two sets of questions in order to create a break between the personal inquiry into the elderly participants' lives and the inquiry that was geared towards general societal images associated with growing old.

Four of the offspring's interviews and two of the acquaintances' interviews were conducted via the phone. Although these interviews lacked the personal interaction of an in-person interview,

they did not seem to lack in details and information. However, phone interviews were used only when there was no other choice (e.g., the participant lived in faraway places and had no plans to visit New York City in the foreseeable future). Whenever a phone interview was necessary, the consent forms were sent by mail and the interviews were conducted when the forms were returned.

Data Analysis

Familiarizing myself with the data.

Learning.

The main source of the data consisted of the interviews. The interviews were conducted through open-ended questions and a demographic questionnaire. I kept notes before and after every interview that described the process of establishing connections with the interviewee (e.g., phone calls, emails) and first impressions, ideas and doubts. Notes were also kept regarding the place of the interview (e.g., what other people were around, phone calls, conversations outside of the interview) and regarding the more technical parts of the interview process (taping, consent forms). That information was useful in preparing sketches of the participants and helped to color and deepen their stories as they were formed through their own words.

Reading and rereading.

A professional transcriber who signed a confidentiality agreement transcribed the interviews. For confidentiality reasons, the names of all participants, all names that were mentioned in the course of the interview and any other identifiers were changed. I performed all post-transcription readings and analyses, using a multiple-read methodology.

The first reading of the transcriptions was done while simultaneously listening to the tapes. This reading was also used to review every transcribed word for editing, in case it was unclear or misunderstood by the transcriber. The second step in owning the data and in

becoming familiar with its form as a written text was reading it in a naïve way three times.

Although it may seem mechanical, reading, rereading, and then reading again was integral to the consolidation of valid first impressions and the creation of new meanings.

Working with the data.

Giving a title, writing notes.

On the fourth reading, I started to summarize each paragraph by giving it a descriptive title that usually came from actual phrases used in the interview. Each group's interviews (i.e., actors, offspring and acquaintances) were read independently. On the fifth reading, transcripts were read grouped by triads; I wrote notes for every transcription indicating main ideas and also the general impressions revealed by the written version of the voices. In the process of reading and familiarizing myself with the data, I prepared a short summary for each narrative. In this way, the essence of each interview was also captured in the form of an essay and not only as a dialogue between participant and interviewer.

Categorization.

To start the process of condensing the data, I created a table that contained a summary of each paragraph of the interview. Some of the summaries were easily created; a title was enough to explain them (e.g., "The Writing Project," "Death of Husband at an Early Age," "Worries for Children's Well-being"). Other paragraphs needed a longer title to capture their content. For example: "Deep friendship with six women and worries to lose them as death is a constant present." "Meditation — takes a big part in life — and helps overcome anxieties and disappointments." "Growing up in a poor family, could not afford college, got married early on and raised a big family, attended college later on."

With the table, I formed categories that would become the themes used to understand the meanings the elderly participants gave to their lives.

Arranging the data according to categories.

Once an initial list of categories was extracted, quotations relevant to each category were put together for each of the 16 actors. A different file had the list of categories that were used for every interview. After eliminating, consolidating and adding categories, a final list of themes was created (see Appendix D for full list of Themes).

Some of the themes initially identified were not included in the final list, if they were either mentioned by very few of the participants, or did not seem to offer additional insights into the themes described in the following chapter.

Analyzing offspring and acquaintances interviews.

The interviews of the offspring and the acquaintances groups were then analyzed with these particular themes. In addition, two topics that were specifically relevant to these two groups were coded: their perceptions of their own old age and their ability to help the elderly participants in their triad in his or her physical needs.

Arranging data under themes.

The different narratives were arranged under the final themes (see Appendix D for full list of themes). I kept, however, the personal identification of each quotation appended to each theme so as not to lose the voice of the individual. I arranged them by group and by triads and looked for the story of the group, the story of the triad and the story of the individual.

Although the data gathered in this study represents a reality outside of the room, that reality was being shaped and molded by the interaction that was built within the room. By choosing a specific path or following a specific hint, the interviewer can influence the data, move

it and rearrange it to coincide with his or her interests. However, it can also be an interaction between people where the dynamic between the interviewee and the interviewer can shift the focus and rearrange the information. For example, the interviewee may be interested in conveying a message that is less relevant to the topics discussed but is more relevant to the interviewee's own ideas regarding the interpretations that might be given to the data. I tried to be aware of the undercurrents and their influence while conducting the interviews and when analyzing the data. I strove to keep in view the multidimensional aspects of the situation and how they could build, affect, turn around and influence the conclusions that were drawn.

Chapter Three: Findings

The present chapter consists of three parts. The first part consists of demographic information of the three groups of participants and sketches of the elderly participants. The second part consists of the descriptions of the setting of the interviews and what it added to the understanding of the narratives. The third part lays out the different themes that came out in the narratives of the actors and the ways these themes were reflected in the offspring's and acquaintances' narratives.

Who They Are

The actors.

The 16 elderly participants who told me stories about their lives were very much their own people as they were an opportunity, a lens through which to look at our neighborhoods and ourselves. The engagement in telling, listening, explaining, observing and interpreting the voices of the three groups of participants created a new balance between the everyday reality and the way one represented that reality in a narrative format for others to share. An important segment in this balance was the elderly participants who gave the main voice, the voice of the actors, to the present study. The information for this section was gathered from the transcribed interviews for all three groups and from observations and notes taken during the interviews.

The actors were similar in more than one way (see Appendix B, Table 1 for their demographic distribution). They were born between the years 1914 and 1929 and an average age of 84. Fourteen of them were born in the USA, ten of them in New York City, where they currently lived. Four were born in other states and two were born in Europe. Nine of the participants had a graduate school education, five had a BA degree and two referred to their education as high school degree with some college courses. In comparison, the group of

offspring had a similar educational profile; eight had a graduate school education and six had a BA degree. Given the different historical times, the elderly group consisted of people who were above their generation in terms of educational and vocational achievements; in that sense, they had done slightly better than their offspring. Most of them held professional positions for most of their adult lives (social work, education, business, medicine, etc.). Only one woman was a homemaker, once she got married. One woman never married at all. Two participants, one man and one woman, did not have children; each chose young relatives as their offspring voice. Out of the eight women, only one lived with her husband at the time of the interview, the others lived by themselves- either divorced (one) single (one) or widowed (five). All the men were married and lived with their spouses.

When I began to think about the present study, I felt that I wanted to have a better grasp of the experience and meaning of old age. I wanted to talk to people who, other than their old age, did not suffer from severe impairments which affected their level of independence. With my participants — who were of Jewish origin (15 out of 16), living in NYC, graduating from fine universities and high level professionals — I could easily be looking at my own future.

The offspring.

The offspring group seemed to be a fair representation of urban middle class members and the children one would expect the present group of actors to raise (See Appendix B, Table B2 for demographic distribution). At the time of the interviews, their average age was 50, situated within the age range of the baby boomers. They all had reached various levels of college education, to various degrees and all were professionals. Half of them were married, five were single and two were divorced. Of the 15 members of the group, half had children. There

was greater variation in marital status within this group when compared to the actors (parents) group but not so much regarding education and profession.

The acquaintances.

The group of acquaintances was the most difficult group to establish (see Appendix B, Table B3 for demographic distribution). In comparison to the actors group, more than half the acquaintance group was born outside of the USA. Educationally and professionally, they were similar to the rest of the participants. It took longer for the elderly participants to choose them. Although the selection criteria were made clear to them, actors did not always follow the request to choose (1) acquaintances that were younger than themselves and (2) acquaintances that had known them for the last five years. I ended up interviewing the people that were referred to even if, when meeting them, I realized that they were not significantly younger than the actor who referred them(3), or that they knew the actor significantly more than five years(2). The average age of the acquaintance group was 57. Among the 14 acquaintances, three could have been interviewed as actors (although they were a bit younger than the people that referred them) and two knew the actors for more than five years. The acquaintances group also differed in the amount of intimacy they shared with the actors. Some of them knew their actors pretty well; some claimed to know them a little.

Sketches of the elderly participants.

Hanna.

Hanna was 86 years old. I interviewed her in two sessions and then visited her, once or twice, for a friendly chat. I did not have post-interview visits with any of the other participants.

Hanna was concerned about the interview. Mainly, about topics and questions that would be covered and she called me a couple of times before our actual meeting. She wanted to know

exactly what I was looking for and, more than that, what I wanted to hear from her that would also portray her in a way Hanna herself would approve of. She canceled the first scheduled meeting because she could not sleep all night, trying to think of what she could say about “meaning in life.” Hanna made it clear that, in her opinion, there was no meaning in life. As she said in one of our early phone conversations, “What’s the meaning of all that? There isn’t one.”

A widow for over 40 years, with three grown children and several grandchildren, Hanna lived by herself in a tidy apartment in the center of the city. The streets around her were noisy and bursting with movement and energy. It was quiet and still in her home. Her living room seemed to be a memory room: pictures, objects from faraway places but also magazines, mail and a piano. Her bedroom was an island of technology; Hanna connected to the outside world through the Internet and used a computer, a printer and a fax machine. She was slim and a bit bent. She walked with difficulty, due to a severe back problem, but her hair was done, her lips had lipstick, her mind was sharp and her opinions were strong and articulate. She had books she thought I needed to read, pictures I needed to look at and events that needed commentary. The interaction was lively. Hanna showed a keen interest in my affairs and my family but, in the background, there was always the loneliness that she expressed in the following comment: “What will I do when you are gone?” There was a silent sense of despair with Hanna, more so than with any of the other participants.

Pearl.

At the time I met Pearl, I was still preoccupied with my pre-conceived notions about old age; however, her calculated optimism, her agency and her ability to set long terms goals were inspiring. Pearl was 78. She had the figure of a young girl, slim and well proportioned. She walked around with a straight back and with grace. She maintained her good posture and

youthful appearance, among other things, by regular visits to a local gym (at least three times a week). Later, I learned that her healthy life style was relatively recent, the result of a traumatic life threatening illness from which she recovered a couple of years ago. Her recovery made Pearl determined to maintain her body in the best shape she could and from an “always on the heavy side” woman who never exercised and never paid too much attention to healthy nutrition, she became a model for her age. That determination helped Pearl through a difficult life. Widowed with three small children, she went back to school, earned a degree and worked for many years in a public institution. She retired as the head of her department. Mourning for her husband’s death was long but, once she was on the track to healing, she continued successfully with her life. She lived in a subsidized apartment for elderly citizens, a move she made after being on a waiting list for many years. This move was one example of her tendency to plan ahead and set goals for the future.

Lydia.

Lydia was 89 when I met her and, until recently, she was still working a couple of days a month as a substitute teacher in a school near her home. Lydia lived in a building that had some city-subsidized apartments for elderly citizens. It was not an assisted living environment but an “elderly-friendly, doorman building.” When I met her, Lydia was about to embark on a new career as a writer. She was in the midst of writing a memoir that would express not just her life story but her story in light of the historical times in which she had lived. Lydia positioned her story as embedded in the times she lived through. She was interested in the political and social insights that could be generated from those times and through her own personal anecdotes. Although she had her share of romantic relationships, she never married. Lydia found the most satisfying period of her life to be the time she was involved in radical social movements,

surrounded by sharp, intelligent people who worked for social causes. She was a self-made woman who left home young and supported herself through two masters' degrees and a career in nonprofit organizations. The first daughter in a large family, Lydia was the engine behind moving the family forward. In addition to being her mother's helper from an early age, when she moved out of the house, she was the one to help her siblings to achieve their dreams. In her late eighties, with the death of her younger and only remaining brother, Lydia said that she had started to make peace with the past and was looking at some psychological conflicts that, she believed, had held her back in some areas of her life. It was a process that brought her insight and tranquility and, at the same time, allowed her to put her life into a more favorable perspective.

Marge.

Marge was 78 years old but, in our first phone call, she sounded too young to be part of my research. When meeting her, she was radiant and energetic — qualities that were well communicated even over the phone. During the interview, she sat on her sofa with one leg underneath her in a complicated posture that required flexibility and endurance. You would not know that, for many years, she had suffered from sleep apnea and that it had left her in a constant state of fatigue. Long divorced and raising two children, she worked hard to maintain herself and her family. She never married again and lived by herself in a cozy apartment. The city had been a big player in her life with its possibilities and institutions, classes and people. Marge liked to travel and hoped never to stop. She tried to visit as many countries and cultures as possible. She was hungry to learn more about people and about herself. Marge was one of the few participants that firmly stated her belief that things might be even more exciting five years from now and that aging should not affect her. However, practicality was one of her virtues;

there was a spare room in the apartment in case she needed assistance on a daily basis due to age related deterioration.

Mary.

Mary held to her daily routine: visiting a cultural center where she worked on art and writing, ate lunch, socialized with people her age and came back in the afternoon for a quiet evening at home. Mary felt that it would have been difficult for her to overcome life obstacles without the cultural center. She would have been lost in sadness; lost in worries about a sick family member, lost in longings for her husband who died early and who left her overwhelmed with a big family and no job. Mary was 80 years old. Her voice was weak and her speech slow but her appearance was strong and solid. The bright pictures she painted were hung on her apartment walls as a vivid reflection of her inner strength and optimism. Growing up, Mary was too poor to afford college but completed her education, later in life, with the help of a supportive husband who encouraged her to pursue her interests. Mary lived on a small budget and, recently, one of her daughters moved in with her; this made her feel much more secure and less lonely, even if they did not spend much time together.

Misha.

Misha appeared in strong colors: bright reddish hair, deep red blouse, black leather pants, blue eyes and bold lipstick. She was beautiful and being in her eighties did not change it. In her spirit and manners, Misha was an artist. She smoked, although she had just recovered from a difficult illness. She raised her voice and talked with her hands, she wrote and composed music and her apartment was a mess. At the age of 81, Misha felt that she had everything imagined, only not for a long time. Now she was still struggling economically. Misha lived in a small apartment in a commercial part of the city. She did not like to tell her age because she did not

feel her age — but also because she was afraid that her part time position would be taken from her, if her employers knew how old she was. From her perspective and with her strong religious faith, everything was possible and she planned on being around for a long time with all her faculties intact. Recently, she applied for a scholarship given to young Jewish artists. She hoped that they would be open enough to consider her but they were not.

David.

David was waiting for me in front of our meeting place, neatly dressed, short, fragile in appearance but with a warm and firm handshake. David was 92 years old and planned to live at least to 100 years. He did not anticipate anything bad happening to him between now and then. In any case, he claimed, “We are all forms of energy and we don’t really die. We transform.” The possibility of moving into an assisted living facility was mentioned in family discussions but David did not want to and, at any rate, it was too expensive. “We lived too long,” he giggled, “I did not factor into my financial arrangements that we will live so long.”

His family was the most important part of his life these days. Unfortunately, they were far away and he didn’t get to see them often. Optimism was the foundation of his existence. He liked to read but his eyes were weak, so he listened to taped books. He could still play chess and was the president of his neighborhood chess club. His memory failed him but his wife remembered very well what needed to be remembered and besides, “A failing memory helps you forget the bad moments.”

Sherry.

Sherry was the only married woman in the actors’ group. Sherry worried while her husband did not. Eighty eight years old, elegant and well groomed, she could hardly walk and used a walker. Her posture was bent and she looked thin and fragile. Sherry worried. She felt

betrayed by her body. She had always been in good shape — exercising, walking and keeping a healthy life style. Now she was crippled with a weak body and much pain. If she did one thing during the day, like going out shopping, she was tired for the rest of the day. Sherry had been a homemaker all her life, raising her children and taking care of the house while her husband provided for the family. She was a great cook and very particular about cleaning. Maintaining these functions was still her most important concerns but it had become difficult. As much as she tried, she could hardly keep up with the very basics. She worried about what would happen if she could no longer do even the little she still did. For the present, she and her husband were managing by taking things slowly and doing less than they wanted but enough to get by. Sherry was one of the more disabled people among the participants. She was in pain most of the time and totally dependent on her husband to get around. However, she showered by herself and every morning, if she was not in pain and if she had a nice plan for the day- lunch with a friend or sitting in the park — she was happy.

Hersh.

Hersh was 80 years old and had no complaints. Life had treated him well. He was still working in his consulting business a couple of hours a day, had a large range of interests, was physically and intellectually active and was passionate about what needed to be fixed in American society. Most actors stressed their progressive social attitudes and so did Hersh, considering himself to be a socialist and a liberal. He lived in a house full of interesting objects but felt ready and able to move to assisted living, if required. Hersh was married for a long time and had children and grandchildren.

Hersh was more interested in the scientific standards of qualitative research than in his answers to the research questions. He was the only participant, for example, who inquired why I

had advertised in my flyer that I am interested in the meaning of life but never asked about it directly in the interview. He questioned my questions and wondered what I could possibly do with the answers. Some of his doubts resonated and are still with me

Jonah.

Jonah was born in Eastern Europe and still had traces of an accent in his speech. At the age of 84, he was still working as a consultant and assistant in a nonprofit organization he used to chair for many years. Jonah was a man of action, busy and goal-oriented. We sat in a conference room in the offices of the organization he worked for, constantly interrupted by secretaries who came for his signature or who transferred phone calls to him. Part of it had to do with Jonah's orientation towards work; after his retirement from an executive position, he offered his help for whatever was needed. Some of what he was now doing was apparently of minor importance but Jonah felt just as comfortable signing off small expenses, as he felt talking to high-ranking foreign politicians. Jonah so identified with his work that he would manage to talk about it from any angle presented. His life as a young Jewish boy in conquered Europe, his escape from the Germans to the United States, his return as an American soldier fighting for the liberation of his home country — all this indicated the roots of Jonah's lifelong sense of service to the Jewish people. Jonah described it more simply: "I did what I needed to do and I will continue as long as I can." Jonah was also a devoted family man and an active participant in social activities and social charities.

Maria.

Maria lived with her daughter, which meant there was someone else in the house with her to share dinners, weekends and the everyday comings and goings of a household. I needed Maria's daughter, however, to enlighten me about her mother's melancholy — something that I

did not pick up on initially. Maria was 88 years old, small and thin and unable to sit still for too long. There was always something that needed to be done. Maria was one of the few participants who talked about the past more than she talked about the present. Her stories were detailed and interesting. As a young divorcee with two small children, (at a time when support for women who left home was not at all assured), her life story was paved with obstacles and victories. Maria also told the story of the city — of times when neighborhoods were safe, families were united and everyone on the block was struggling. Maria described herself as an energetic young girl and a very vigorous, active, woman; traits that she defined as being the core of her identity. She was still doing some clerical work from home for a big company, taking care of three or four pets, trying to take care of the house and driving a friend to the doctor. She was doing all that encumbered by a fragile, not too strong, not too healthy and aging body — and she did not like it at all. She wanted to be able to do much more.

Simon.

At 93-years-old, Simon looked his age and depicted a distinguished air of authority, confidence and pride. Simon, a successful businessman, thought that my research was trivial, my questions naive and supposed that the answers, I would get from my participants, would probably be of minimal importance. Simon also argued that there was really no need to construct a triad for him; his offspring were busy and the only young acquaintances he had worked for him and, therefore, could not talk candidly about him. Simon gave me a frank, to the point, interview, regarding his participation as an opportunity to influence a younger generation. For Simon, such occasions should be executed in the hope that one might help raise the world up from the gutter — not that he had much optimism for the future of the world. The controversial issues of old age and aging were dealt with cynicism and Simon concealed any anxious thoughts

about the future with jokes about his immortality. Simon held a pessimistic view about what would become of our world but a very solid and optimistic view regarding his personal achievements and goals.

Abraham.

Eighty five years old, polite, humorous and even-tempered, Abraham wondered why his daily routines were so predictable, why his life had shrunken into this calm, surprise-free existence, where the main excitements were of the unwanted kind (e.g., worries for his wife's health). However, Abraham, married with children and grandchildren, loved his routines: dedicating long hours for grocery shopping and preparing dinners, taking a stroll in the neighborhood on a nice day, visiting the gym regularly and enjoying conversations with neighbors and friends. Abraham was also an example of the burden modern life puts upon families. His children lived nearby and, hypothetically, he could see them quite often. In reality, they spoke once a week or so over the phone and saw each other only occasionally.

Jayson.

Jayson, at 80 years old, was still experiencing his life on high amplitudes. When he spoke about his painful forced retirement, it sounded like it had happened yesterday. When he commented on the state of the country, he was worried and annoyed. When he spoke about his family life, he was amazed that some issues felt as forceful today as they did 50 years ago. Fifteen years a retiree, Jayson was still trying to find a meaningful routine for his life. He was not bored — quite the opposite. Sometimes, it was not clear to him how he could fit, before he retired, a full time position as a managing executive into his life, when now there was so much else to do. After accomplishing the details of his daily routine — taking care of household

matters, exercising, reading, meeting with friends — there was not much time left for the more serious projects he had planned to accomplish when he retired.

Bernard.

Bernard's interest and familiarity in psychology made the interview flow in an orderly fashion. At 81 years old, it seemed that he'd told his life story many times, at least to himself. Bernard was deeply introspective about his life. For Bernard, the beginning was very bad, middle-life an improvement and now, for the last third, it was better every day. In the beginning, he lost his mother at the age of five and grew up with a resentful father. The middle years improved when a relative sent him to therapy, which he continued for many years, resulting in college education and a career as a professor. The last third of his life was even better, when Bernard discovered his real passion and talent for art and he began to paint constantly. He was married and enjoyed couplehood, social life and a house in the country. Bernard was still in awe when talking about what he had accomplished. For him, every year seemed to bring more possibilities.

Arthur.

Arthur, 84 years old, was the perfect interviewee; witty and clever, quick to make contact, interested in the interviewer without being intrusive; he was insightful and funny, telling great stories and anecdotes that reflected a rich, spiritual and adventurous life. Coming from Eastern Europe as a child and growing up in a hardworking immigrant family, Arthur freed himself from ties to family traditions he did not agree with, joined the army, tried out few careers and, finally, established himself as a known scholar. He also enjoyed a good family life, children and grandchildren, a social network and a fabulous retirement into a new artistic hobby. Arthur treated me as he probably treated his students during his work as a college professor; he was

slightly amused by my questions, but, always, cordial and cooperative and clearly interested in influencing my thoughts. Arthur was open about his life and fun to talk to. Only when he reached out for the water glass or to shake my hand, was his constant trembling noticeable and his strong and energetic voice over the phone concealed the fact that he needed more than one reminder as to the things we agreed upon.

Looking across the sketches.

An important observation came out from re-reading the sketches presented here. It seemed that if I took out the obvious tells of age (chronological age, for example), my sketches would become ageless. The complexity around old age, the slippery definitions and multidimensional perceptions: when was one considered old, who knew when one was old, how did it feel to be old, what did it mean to be old, influenced the written representations by blurring the impact of age and making the script general.

The setting.

In order to understand the narratives that follow, it was important to make note of the different settings of the interviews that provided additional information. The home settings permitted me to have a rare glimpse of the participants' personal spaces — the way they moved around the space, the things they surrounded themselves with, the motion, the noise or the quietness of their homes. In some cases, the setting complemented the content of the interview. For example, Hersh met with me in his home office; the phone calls, the active computer, the books and paper work scattered about, all indicated that he was leading a very active life. For others, it was a welcome contradiction. No matter what Mary could or could not tell me about her main activity of the day (taking art class), seeing the brightly colored, optimistic, paintings on her walls told me much more than her words. It was a vivid demonstration of the balance she

was negotiating between the despair, brought on by some of the harsh realities of her life, and her ability to put all her worries aside and reveal a colorful inner world in her paintings.

In some homes, it was the life on display that impressed me the most: Framed pictures, little objects from different places, special books, written works, acknowledgments of past achievements, medication, postcards. Sometimes, the richness of the display was in sharp contrast to the quiet, sometimes shallow, if not empty, present. Often, it was like a tapestry woven together of past and present. Interviews in participants' offices or at the Graduate Center had a different, almost contradictory flavor. There, where the majority of passersby were comparatively young and in the midst of a younger generation buzz, the participants did not seem to belong or blend — they stuck out.

An important aspect of authenticity in narrative research concerns who we as researchers are in reference to the topics we try to explore and how much we are emotionally invested in those topics. How much of what drives us is a personal quest and how much of it is an intellectual curiosity. For my elderly participants, I was about the age that their offspring might be; I was not a typical younger graduate student but I was young enough to be in the position of a student to them. The offspring and the acquaintances groups were more or less of my generation, dealing perhaps with similar dilemmas regarding aging parents and their own aging process. Still, the main players of my research were the elderly participants and the greatest challenge was to present their voices in an authentic way.

Themes of Meaning

In the next section I describe the themes that came out from the elderly participants' narratives and the ways these themes appeared among their offspring and acquaintances' narratives when talking about the elderly participants' lives. (See Appendix D for full list of

Themes). Embedded in the narratives were aspects of lives in the midst of growing old. Some of the triads' interviews advanced in parallel paths depicting a unifying perspective regarding the actors; some shed light on different angles of the actors' lives. Depending on the findings, the three voices of the triads — the elderly participant, the offspring and the acquaintance — were presented either as a collective voice (e.g., the group of actors, the group of offspring, the group of acquaintances) or as the voices of each individual triad (e.g., Hanna's triad, Arthur's triad). When two triads or more depicted similar ideas, I mentioned them under the same title (e.g., Lidia's and Marge's triads).

First reflection on self, on parent, on acquaintance at present.

The following theme represented the first reflection of the participants on their lives and the first reflections of their offspring and acquaintances. In that sense, this theme served as a meta theme, an introduction to the different narratives and the way they interacted and intertwined among each triad.

“How is life for you these days?” “How is life for your parent these days?” “How is life for your elderly acquaintance these days?” The opening question usually resulted in an account that tried to capture life in general for the actor. People usually referred to what they considered to be a main characteristic of the life in question and elaborated on that. As the interview rolled on, they added more details to this initial, spontaneous narrative and then moved on to different topics.

Hanna's triad.

Hanna's triad, when reflecting on her life at present, showed more diverse opinions than any other of the triads. Hanna, her son and her young acquaintance each had a different understanding of her life. Although, they all were quite knowledgeable about the everyday bits

and pieces, their interpretations of these details were different and displayed the complexity of diverse perspectives. Hanna was among the few ones who reported being lonely and did so in her opening remark: “Life is alright but it’s a little lonely. It’s hard. It’s hard. Am I unhappy? No, I’m not unhappy, I’m lonely.”

Her son, while identifying also her loneliness as a major theme in her life, gave it a different interpretation:

I think, all in all, probably, loneliness is what best characterizes her state right now. She is pretty lonely, at the same time; she has a hard time being with people. So the loneliness is to some degree of her own creation.

For Hanna’s young acquaintance, loneliness was not the main feature that came first to mind.

Her first impression of Hanna was almost of a different quality:

Hanna, for me, is a person that loves life. She’s very passionate. Maybe it’s personality as well, since she, I believe, is a very passionate individual. And I feel that she’s holding on passionately to every moment. I think she takes every moment in a very meaningful way. And she attempts to make the most of it.

Pearl’s triad.

Pearl’s triad was a triad of consensus where all three members described her life these days in a positive and appreciative tone. Pearl declared that:

Overall, I would say that it’s remarkably good. I have some light medical problems but in general, they’re not life threatening and they don’t slow me down too much. And I’m at the best time of my life. I consider this the best time. Though, I can pick individual events earlier in my life that stand out as being very outstanding events. But in terms of

overall, in general lifestyle, the general way I live my life and feel about myself and my life — it's the best that it's ever been.

Her daughter felt the same:

My observations are that she's very happy. She loves retirement. She's very active in life; she probably is busier than I am. It's wonderful, to be that alive and that active and that much involved with her community. So life for Pearl is full; it seems very exciting to me. It makes me happy to know that she has this full life. I find it fascinating that you can retire and be busier than you were in your life before that. But it's good busy – she's painting and she goes to the gym three times a week, you know? Amazing, amazing to me.

Pearl's acquaintance, who was closer to her age, was more cautious in her description but she, also, thought that life these days seemed to be agreeable to Pearl:

I think she is enjoying it. I think she certainly has concerns about her aging and I think that's frequently related to a lot of friends of her that have various illnesses. But overall, I think she has really enjoyed her retirement and made the best of it. She's enjoying her family.

Lidia's and Marge's triads.

For three out of the eight women I interviewed, the first statement made about their lives was one of satisfaction (although with different levels of agency and power). Lidia and Marge talked from different angles but in the same manner. Like Pearl, the “now” was described as being the best time of their lives. Their offspring and acquaintances felt the same way. Lidia and Marge were free, independent and had enough money for their needs. They were busier than ever and enjoyed a life lived for themselves without family members needing them. They felt

the mistresses of their houses, controlling their money and time. However, both women felt that the only thing they needed more of was time. There were so many cultural and social events they wanted to be part of and the days were too short. Even though they talked later about their concerns and doubts, their first and strong reactions to life these days were optimistic and thankful.

Sherry's triad.

Sherry was one of the most physically feeble actors. At the age of 88, she suffered from fatigue, back pain and could barely walk, even with the help of a walker. Having been an active woman until she reached that stage, she felt that her independence was being ripped from her slowly but surely. Sherry was one of the few participants who talked about future fears, should her medical situation deteriorate. She was anxious because she did not seem to have any solutions ready. However, her attitude was positive and, in a simple way, she showed an ability to find joy within a difficult situation. When starting her account on how life is for her, she said:

Not great. But on some days when I wake up and I've had a good night's sleep and, maybe, we have a date for lunch or something— that's better than other days when it's grey outside and we have no plans and I didn't sleep well. I feel sorry for myself, well, *c'est la vie*. However, on certain days, I feel happier than other days.

Her son, who focused on her medical situation as the main feature of her life these days, saw also possibilities; even a walker could become an improvement if you look for the optimistic angle:

I think it's a little difficult right now. She is very weak. So she can't do the things like the things that she was able to do. She can't get around as much as she would like, although, I think she's probably a little stronger, maybe a little bit more confident than

she was a year ago. I saw her couple of months ago and, then, the last time I saw her was about three weeks ago and there was some improvement. But she's still weak and it bothers her—although you know, she is 88 and I am glad that her mind is still alert. And now she uses the walker, which gives her more freedom. For a year or so before she was given the walker, she actually fell two or three times.

The young woman Sherry chose as her acquaintance supplied the voice of convention which suggested life must be hard if you are where Sherry was:

I think it's hard because it's hard to, you know, be getting older and older. I think it's hard because she knows it's the end of her life. I don't know that much but I know that their bodies aren't working as well as they used to, so they have physical pain and that's hard for them.

Nevertheless, she emphasized:

When we talk to her, she sounds very good, so her big family keeps her going. She talks to her sons, and then, of course, their kids and grandchildren. I think that gives some meaning to her life. Otherwise, it must be hard, that's what I think.

Maria's triad.

Like Sherry, Maria was also 88 years old, small and fragile — but she presented a different perspective. In a way, Maria never really came to terms with growing old. Becoming less independent, more fragile and losing her faculties was unforgivable. Maria still drove in her neighborhood, took her friends to doctor appointments and did not hesitate to stand on the kitchen counter to water her hard-to-reach plants or to hang all her Christmas decorations. Her daughter has moved into Maria's house and Maria enjoyed an active household. Still, she was not happy; if anything, she was restless and feisty. Maria began by counting her blessings,

however, sarcastically:

But as I've said, I'm lucky. I could be in a wheelchair, I could be deaf, I could be a diabetic, I could have kidney, I could be on dialysis — you know, all that stuff. I'm lucky though; I mean, I have my daughter here. So every once in a while, there is a little something that comes up. Lifts you out of your wondering why we're here in the first place. I don't know. Old age? I don't like it.

Her daughter thought her mother was not content but suggested that, maybe, Maria had always been like that. Her first reaction to how life was for Maria:

Difficult. Not because she's so physically handicapped, although she is to a certain extent. But she's not happy. You know, I guess, sometimes, she is but I wish she were, I wish — Okay, she's not happy. I wish she were more happy. I wish she was happy but you know what? I don't think she's ever really been happy. So, maybe, how can I expect her to be happy now? She doesn't have enough strength in her legs, though. She's mad that she can't do everything she's always been able to do. That's the thing. She's very upset that, why can't she run around? Well, she's so sharp and she can't do all of the things that she wants to do because of her physical body. But her mind is still doing all of them. She wants to pull the house apart like she used to, you know, she wants to pull the garage apart like she used to.

Maria's acquaintance had an optimistic view of Maria:

I think she has a great life. She has a daughter living with her now. She's a very active woman. Maria is always busy doing things. And I always say to her, "I hope that I one day be just like you, a very active lady." I think she has a blessed life. She seems to enjoy her life. Maria never shows me that things bother her, really — that getting older

bothers her — so I don't think that it bothers her. I think that it's something that she has accepted. We all going to get older and you're going to do things slower, at a slower pace.

Mary's triad.

For Mary, it was not her own health but the health of a close relative that affected her general mood; she was worried and helpless because she could not be of much help to them. And yet, Mary could look at the positive side of her life now and so could her daughter and her acquaintance. Mary said:

Well, life now — I try to keep myself occupied so I don't go to pieces right now, which would be easy for me to do. I go on to the senior program. And I go there four times a week. I'm a painter and I paint there. And I see people there that I like very much. So this helps me. You can't be happy. Because it's always in the back of my mind; this is in the back of my mind always. But as I say, I'm very fortunate that I am involved with art and painting because I'm still trying.

Her daughter expressed more clearly the benefits of life now for Mary:

I would say that she's going through lots of stress over the illness in the family; however, she's coping very well and she still continues her activities. And actually in some ways, she feels better now, because she has this apartment and having a stable place to be has such a meaning for her. She has her income, her fixed income. And she doesn't live high but she lives. She's not overwhelmed by kids, you know, she doesn't have a job that she hates (which she did for a long time, you know) — she could paint. She can do what she likes to do. In some ways her life is more quiet, and the way she wants it.

Mary's acquaintance was aware of the tragic events of Maria's life but was also aware of Mary's resilience in facing them:

I think it's mixed. I think it's hard in a lot of ways; she's someone — at least when you talk to her, she doesn't flinch away from what's really going on — but she's also someone who likes to be diverted. I mean, she's said that to me. And she takes a lot of art classes. So I think that she's great at dealing with things but also using, I'm going to say, the life of the imagination to make things easier. Which is one of the things we really — I think I do that also. It's one of the things we really like about each other.

Misha's triad.

Misha's triad, like Hanna's, also depicted three different versions of her life. Misha looked bravely at her life these days. It was "interesting":

I got here, which I never really quite expected. And I have had a fabulous, very interesting life. No complaints. Some — but I can't complain. I've always had everything. The way I put it is, I've had everything that anybody could ever want, just not for very long. Nothing lasted too long. But I've had everything. No matter where you dip your finger in, I've had it. Just nothing ever lasted. Because there was always an end to it. So now I'm in a different phase, fortunately or unfortunately, because for the first time in my life — I would say last year, by now, but — I guess I had never counted on being sick, since I had been very, very blessed, extremely, extremely blessed. If I had to say anything, it's how blessed I've been. And still is. You know, I have a lot of things that I wish were different in my life but — I got here.

For Misha's daughter, the reality was much more sober:

I think life for her is very difficult on a number of levels. I think she struggles a lot, in every area of her life. She's not secure in any area of her life. She worries about her health. She worries about money. I think she's very lonely and her world has shrunk. I think my mother is very depressed and I think she has been depressed for a long, long time. But she's in total denial about it.

A plain, almost superficial view was expressed by Misha's acquaintance: "She seems to be okay. I mean she's, I mean, she's friendly, she always has a great disposition. She always has a smile in her face, she's very friendly, she communicates very well."

As I mentioned earlier, these were the first snapshots, the beginnings and the first responses that came to each participant's mind without much preparation. Some actors were even taken back by the unexpectedness of the question, "How is life for you these days?" A few told me later that they were ready to indulge in a philosophical discussion about the meaning of life and not talking about their everyday affairs. These spontaneous, first reactions seemed to be a solid source of self-knowledge, as well as a recognized, established story that one lived by.

And the men...

Life for the elderly male group was undoubtedly alike: It's all great; almost great but great enough, no complaints, thanks for asking. In the opening statements and throughout the interviews, according to the men, life was just fine. There was one fact that catches the eye when looking at the profile of the eight men in the present research. All the men who answered my ad or were referred by friends or relatives were married. As a comparison, all but one of the elderly women participants were single. The women were either widowed or divorced for a long time. Also, it seemed that perhaps men's lives were great but so was their desire to portray their lives in a positive way to the outside world. More than the women, who were ready to indulge

right away in telling their stories and were more willing to discuss sensitive issues, the men inquired, in large, about the purpose of the study and were more concern about their place in it.

Arthur's triad.

For Arthur, life was:

My life is very good as a matter of fact. There's something rather wonderful about becoming a so-called senior citizen in America. We occupy most of our early life to establishing who we are. By the time you're my age, if you don't know, you're in bad trouble. I now know who I am and I can do the things I want to do. There are priorities, emotionally, without any reference to a job or promotion or any kind of ambition which used to occupy one's life earlier on. Freedom. . . . So, you get to choose. The central thing, everybody — at least in America, maybe not overseas — we all want to know who we are. Mostly, we spend our lives establishing who we are. I'm 84 years old, I know who I am and that's a terrific relief.

Arthur's daughter shared a similar view about her father's life:

Great, wonderful — He's free, he's happy, he's productive, he has a very active relationship with his grandchildren. He sees them every week. He has a wife and a good social life. I think he enjoys every day. He's involved with his creative work. He is just a very happy, productive, fulfilled person and lots of people love him.

Arthur's acquaintance expressed a similar view although he brought into the conversation the unwelcome limitations of age that neither Arthur nor his offspring were ready to acknowledge at this stage:

I think he's having a wonderful time, considering his age. He is now beyond the venerable age. He's always been a dynamic person, all the years I've known him. He

still is dynamic and he takes life by the horns and makes it his own. So, I think he is doing well. Having said that, there are aspects of aging — not specific to Arthur, but to anyone — where one feels one's own vitality is diminishing — not disappearing but diminishing. The neurons aren't firing — I myself belong to the five minute delay club, when I try to remember a name or a circumstance. And that is offensive to oneself, one feels offended by oneself to oneself. I could talk about that forever. But I think that answers your question.

Bernard's twosome.

Bernard's group consisted of two people, himself and a younger relative and did not include an acquaintance.

Bernard was an artist and fond of jargon and psychodynamic interpretations and he had no doubt about the meaning of his old age for himself:

It's the best time of my life. In my own lifetime, I had a very tragic childhood. And when I was about 40, I began to see the possibilities and, then, each decade became gradually better for me. I am most surprised that, at this time of my life, I feel almost in awe of my present good fortune. That's based on the full prognosis of my early years. I am able to function as an artist, I have a studio, I have a second home. I don't have a substantial career but I'm able to do the work I want to do. I just feel . . . that things could have been different and more rewarding than they were. I'm pleased. Let's say, I feel fortunate that they are as rewarding as they are. It's a long history to explain how I got to that place but that's as simple an answer as I can give you.

Bernard's relative was consistent with Bernard in her observations:

I think it is very pleasant, very fulfilling. I think in many ways he might think it is one of the better periods of his life. I think he is quite happy. I know happy is a pretty general word but he is very pleased. There is a lot that he does in the house and in the yard that keeps him active, keeps him engaged. He's very happy with the work he's doing; he thinks it's among his best. But other aspects — his health, our relationship, the things he is able to do financially — are all about as good as they've ever been.

Simon's solo.

Simon interviewed without an offspring or an acquaintance. He added his voice to the homogeneous choir of satisfied males:

Life is absolutely superb. Physically, I'm in great shape. Mentally, I run a big business very successfully despite the fact that I'm 92.8 years old. I have reconciled myself to the fact that the United States is going downhill at a very fast clip and has a life expectancy in its present political and economic form of anywhere from five to ten years, at most.

Jonah's triad.

Jonah was satisfied too and hoped that life as it is will never end:

Life is very good. I am doing what means a great deal to me. I continue to work, which I started 58 years ago and I am very pleased that I have the opportunity to continue to be active in an enterprising endeavor, which has a greater meaning than a job to me. It wasn't a job to begin with and it still isn't. I am able to physically and mentally, I think, continue to do it on a full time basis. I travel; I participate in the most important activities of the organization in which I started the day the organization was born. I was present at the creation, as they call it, and I've been there ever since. Fortunately, it was a

unique opportunity, never to be repeated. So, in that respect, I have every reason to be content.

From his daughter's perspective, Jonah's life was:

I think it is very good. He goes to work every day, still. Although he is supposedly retired, he has been a consultant for many years — or, as he likes to put it, “insultant.” So, he's continuing to do the things he cares most about.

Jonah's acquaintance shared the same view:

I think he found something at the beginning of his life that he wanted to do more than anything else. Right until today and until the day he dies, he will be doing it. In an interview, he was asked what the job was like and his answer was, “It's not a job, it's a vocation. It's a calling.” He got called and I'm certain he will be doing it unless health prevents him.

Abraham, David.

Only two of the male actors were not involved in some sort of project or work. However, they still found their lives satisfying and so did their triads' members.

For Abraham:

First of all, I didn't expect to live this long to begin with. I have the most wonderful wife in the world, I live in comfortable surroundings. I don't have wealth but we live comfortably. I would say that life is satisfactory; we live a life of reasonable fulfillment and there is nothing that I would have wanted to have done that I haven't done. I didn't make it into the Major Leagues, that's my big frustration! Joking aside, I'm content with the way my life has gone. I have some misgivings about some things that I could have done differently but, offhand, I can't think of any.

And although he was much older and less healthy than Abraham, life for David was:

Very good, my memory's going a little bit, and I get a cold easily but, otherwise, I'm very satisfied. At my age, I have to be grateful for what I've got. I enjoy my children, my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren. I do not expect it to end in a little while, soon.

Jayson's triad.

Jayson's reflection revealed some ambivalence:

Life is storming. I thought it would be rather peaceful, but it's not . . . I mean, it's complex. There is a lot of fulfillment in it because you start your work life and you wonder, "How far will I get, what will I achieve, what will I accomplish and how will it all end up?" And you reach a point where you really do know the answers to these questions. I'm not dissatisfied with the answers to the professional questions. I am upset to see the ways in which the world has moved, at least this society has moved in very different ways from the ways that I worked for much of my life and that's a very upsetting thing to experience. I've also reached an age where it becomes more and more difficult to accomplish certain things.

His son, however, saw only the positive:

He seems very good. He seems steady, he seems to have his routines. He has his friends, he doesn't have major health problems. He doesn't have, he has no responsibilities that are difficult to meet. He leads an active social life and an active intellectual life. And so, in terms of how is life for him, I think, fairly good.

And Jayson's acquaintance agreed: "He seems fine. Seems to be good, very happy. "

Hersh's triad.

Hersh was content with his life today and with the place he perceived himself to be in comparison to others:

On the whole, I would say above average. I have relatively few troubles and problems, my children and grandchildren are all healthy, my wife and I are getting along reasonably well, we're both physically active, we enjoy many different things in life and, certainly, fortunate in terms of our physical possessions and material possessions and our relative physical well-being at 80. My perception of, that we are considerably better off than most of our society.

Hersh's daughter shared a similar view: "I think it's pretty good. I think he would rather be of healthier body but other than that, I think he still feels productive and had a good family and interests."

Hersh's acquaintance reflected on what she saw as the stable aspects of his life and their contribution to his elder years:

Well, I think there is a lot to be said for staying in a community for a long period of time and developing friends and relationships and keeping those relationships over a long period of time, you know. I think there is also a lot to be said for leading a very, a kind of stable life, you know, being married, I think, having a job that provides an income that is more than sufficient, so there is not so much worry and maintaining friends, ties with friends and family.

Conditions of aging.

The process of growing old and the state of being old was not explicitly mentioned when eliciting the narratives from the three groups of participants. The idea of growing old was not

mentioned in order not to impose conventional images of old age upon participant responses. However, aging had a significant presence in the participants' narratives. The next theme, conditions of aging, included the following sub-themes that were related to the aging process.

Health and sickness.

Initially, I thought that the health and sickness narratives would be filled with specific details about aging bodies. Changes when growing old — the face in the mirror, the pain in the morning and an increased fragility and feebleness — would be too obvious to miss. However, health issues played an insignificant part in the participants' narratives. For the most part, participants complained about minor, curable incidents.

As Misha put it, “When I am well, I am fine. Like today, I have this terrible, horrible, achy tooth pulled and I woke up feeling well, like 30, because I am well again.” For Lidia as well, it was the temporary, curable things which bothered her and not the grand picture:

And I'm — you know, apart from the fact that I just lost a tooth and I've had to get it replaced and I have pain through the neck which bothers me from time to time, I have nothing to complain about.

An important tool in dealing with one's age was to acknowledge the difficulties of aging by referring to them as the problem of other old people.

For Jonah, it was other people's worries:

I have colleagues who are my age or older and they say, “You know, I have this and I have that and can't do this and can't do that, I don't care anymore, I've done enough.” I don't have that kind of reaction and I don't see any reason to have it.

And when he thought of “it” for himself — “It” defined as being sick, feeble, disabled, miserable, old — it was all in the future, something that might happen to him but is not here yet.

Sometimes, it seemed as if he did not believe it would happen at all:

It's a fact of life. I mean, I keep repeating myself, it's a fact of life and I've always been a realist in my professional responsibilities and my personal life. I'm aware of the fact that aging — for myself, for my wife or for people in my immediate family — can have effects that can impact on my life as well.

Marge talked about health and deterioration in a general, existential view on life that became even more important as life faded away:

I know people who worry about it but I don't think like that. So I kind of live every day and enjoy every day because, otherwise, you don't enjoy today, worrying about tomorrow. And I feel today's my best day and tomorrow I'm a day older.

An important part of the cultural discourse regarding health and longevity is the “being fit” segment. The participants in the present study took part in this discourse.

Pearl's daughter expressed it clearly, as Pearl herself had much more important things to discuss than health related issues:

She made this decision, “I'm going to be healthy. I'm going to be in the best shape I can.” Not that “I'm going to live forever” — I don't think she has that. I don't see her as wanting to live forever. I see her as wanting to, in whatever is the time left, and I think she wants it to be in the best shape she can be, so she can do the most things. So that she can live, so she can use this time.

This proactive attitude about the importance of keeping their bodies in shape was shared by other actors. The narratives from the two most debilitated women (Hanna and Sherry) provided descriptions of their pains, medications and doctors' appointments but also their strategies, tactics and hopes for a better quality of life.

For Hanna, who needed a walker in order to be able to go out: “I go for a walk because I’ve got to walk. The doctor said, ‘The only way you’re going to get better is if you walk, walk, walk’. So I walk.”

Sherry suffered from a debilitating condition. She had great difficulty in walking and suffered pain when standing too long. She needed a walker and pain killers to get through the day but still:

I have exercises that I do and I find that this is most convenient for me at night.

When I do these exercises, I hold on to the counter and I do these exercises.

For most of the actors, going to the gym regularly was an integral part of their everyday routine, three or four times a week. Jayson found it both funny and hurtful that he needed special permission to use the neighborhood gym used mainly by young people, mostly for fear of him being injured. It was also clear to Jayson that a more disabled existence would be almost impossible for him to tolerate. Being in shape was therefore a necessity:

It does not have to be the bummer that most people fear, if you keep yourself in good shape, physically, and you keep some strong intellectual activity going. That’s the key.

There are people who, for one reason or another, can’t do it, you know — become disabled or are unable to — have never had a core intellectual activity in their lives and, for them, it has to be very difficult. For them, then it becomes silly games at senior centers and card playing and things like that but, maybe, you know, for people who’ve led those kinds of lives, maybe that’s okay. For me — it would have been impossible for me. I would have taken the revolver out from under the pillow.

Simon was ready to talk about minor physical irritations but only when they affected his accomplishments:

Also, the minor problems your body presents you with. For example, after having skied for 70 years, I had to stop skiing this year. Not as a defensive matter because I read of people who died from a bad fall. As we get older when we fall, the damage is much greater than when you are younger. When I play tennis, if I play too hard now, my body has arthritic pains and joints. So, I'm not happy with some of the physical aspects of it.

Marge's complaint was a universal one and was unrelated to growing older:

Yeah, I feel I'm very fat right now. I've never been this heavy in my life. I don't mind getting older, I don't mind getting wrinkles. I don't want to be fat. I really don't. This I can do something about, the other I can't.

Some admitted that their vision and hearing were not that good anymore, that there was a need to slow down and that, sometimes, memory played funny tricks.

The offspring who mentioned their parents' health seemed even less concerned about health issues. Hanna's son, who was her main caretaker and was involved in her medical affairs, did not point out health issues as a worry. Sherry's son spoke briefly about Sherry's diminishing functionality; however, he presented this from her point of view, emphasizing her frustration because of the many things she could not accomplish. He, on the other hand, felt that things had improved a bit for her since last year. Marge's daughter stated that her mother complained of being tired but, judging from the different activities Marge was involved in, tiredness did not seem to stop her. So maybe it was not that serious.

Similar observations were made by the few acquaintances that incorporated health and sickness in their narratives. Their health comments conveyed the idea that whatever the elder actor was experiencing could be observed in younger people as well.

Misha's acquaintance thought that Misha seemed fine: "I think that, Misha — for her age, she seems to be doing well. She's slowed down a little. She doesn't walk as fast as she would. She's always having a great disposition. It's basically it."

Maria's acquaintance felt the same about her elderly acquaintance:

Maria never shows me that things bother her, really—that getting older bothers her — so I don't think that it bothers her. We are all going to get older and you're going to do things slower, at a slower pace. I don't see a very big difference but she will see it and I say, "Maria, you are so strong; I hope I will be like you." But I'm sure that you can see that there is a slight difference but nothing really dramatic.

Hersh's acquaintance marveled about his great health and how it contributed to his general state:

Well, it's because he's healthy. He's extremely healthy — I mean, appears to be. He appeared to be very healthy. He's healthy; his wife is still alive, so he's not lonely, his children are close by, he's financially well off, his mind is still there, his mind is not slipping. So you can see that, as a portrait, I imagine that's what everyone would like.

A slightly different perspective was expressed by two younger members of the acquaintances group. They associated the challenges of health issues with the anxiety surrounding death. They felt so, even though health problems were not communicated to them by the actors.

Hanna's acquaintance thought that, if Hanna was bothered by something, then it was probably her relative nearness to death: "But I think, much deeper — I don't know if she talks about it herself to you — but I think much deeper — It's death, really, going on, you know It's just, it's finishing life, this life."

And Sherry's acquaintance expressed: "I think it's hard because, you know, getting older and older — I think it's hard because she knows it's the end of her life."

Death and dying.

Two subthemes emerged from the death and dying conversation. In one, participants stated what the ideal death for them would be. The other subtheme depicted the force of life in spite of approaching death. Not surprisingly, the ideal death was a death that comes quickly and unexpectedly, a sudden death: a death that happens when one is not "badly old."

Hersh put it almost as a formal plea:

Speaking for myself and my friends, if we have one desire, as we age, it's that we go off the edge of a cliff. That (snaps his fingers), it's over. And not a lingering, debilitating illness which requires other people to care for us, which we become a burden on ourselves, as well as ourselves on them. And I think that's probably a widely held view of people who think about it at all. Well, it's not so theoretical. I know men who — I had two acquaintances who committed suicide rather than face lives of which others would have to take care of them.

Jayson implied that it was better to leave life than to live in a dependent manner:

I think all older people— I have flashes of terror that I'll be disabled in some way and a burden on the people around me. It's something, you know, I absolutely don't want. Nobody wants. And there seems to be very little you can do to avoid it, if that happens to you. You can't sleep with a revolver under your pillow.

Maria expressed comparable views. She had an example of the perfect death:

I want the light to just go out. Boom! My stepmother died that way. She was very religious. She was in church, she died in church. One breath and she was gone. She

died in church, where she loved to be. And she was with her daughter, so it was the perfect death, a shock to all of us but wonderful for her.

Jonah saw it the same way:

Intellectually, I know that this machine could stop at any minute. I can only hope that when it happens, it will happen quickly. I've visited enough people with serious cardiac problems or strokes and it drags on and drags on and drags on. And then, a person I've known is not there anymore and I think "That's a pity." If I had my way, I would like to turn the switch.

However, no one expressed the intention of avoiding medical intervention, if that were the only way to prolong life. It seems that people in the middle of their lives are more firm in expressing their objection to any life-prolonging procedure. However, as they advance in years and adapt to changing health circumstances, they become more ambivalent about their options.

Some participants used the idea of death and dying as a motivator to establish a firm sense of living in the present and enjoying every minute of it. Being absorbed in the moment might have been the best preventive act against end of life depression and a leading force in the continued enjoyment of life.

For Arthur, this was all too apparent:

One of the cheerful things about being my age is that you know you're going to die soon. And it is not a source of despair because we're all going to die. At 84, you have symptoms—and they're called aging. Unless you learn to live with them and do not feel bullied by them and certainly not enslaved by them, you simply do what you do. You don't know when you will die; therefore make the best use of today. Do your best while you are alive. Live while you live, then die and be done with it.

David did not dwell on what might happen and how. He felt that his beliefs supplied him with a protective, powerful shield:

I'm not afraid of dying. I don't believe we die, I believe we recycle. We're all made up of atoms and molecules and we recycle. Our atoms go into the atmosphere and then we are born again. It makes me very content. I'm not afraid of dying. I want to be cremated and have the ashes scattered around the ground and roses bushes, etc., because, as I said, I think we come back— not as ourselves but as part of other people.

More than this, his beliefs helped him to keep an optimistic, vibrant and practical attitude towards the passing of time, an attitude he expressed again and again: “I go through life optimistically, accept life as it comes, one day at a time, take one day at a time and enjoy it.”

Participants referenced anecdotes about other elderly people. These anecdotes helped to prove a point, either to support one's own beliefs and way of life, or to provide an example that contradicted yet reinforced one's way of life. Narratives about death and dying brought to the surface the tension between aging, death and the present and revealed the hope to live for many more years. After all, people stayed healthier and lived longer these days.

For Hanna, the death of others was a powerful, constant presence. She mentioned friends who had passed away and associated their memory with topics of importance in her current life. She actively looked for the deceased: “The first thing I look at every day when I get the paper — what do you think? The Obits! And people are dying so late: 90, 95, 107, somebody died! Who needs that?” Hanna claimed that she did not want to live much longer — but only if she was unable to maintain the fragile equilibrium of her current life. She pointed out the ages of people in the obituaries and identified those that were older than her. By doing so, Hanna was reassured that people do live longer these days and that there would be plenty of time to face

death.

When discussing the issue of independence, Hersh talked about one of his acquaintances. He described a man that was active and vigorous, an asset to people in his office until recently, when personal tragedies distanced him from life and he became bitter and depressed. For Hersh, this was an “end of the road” example. However, implicitly, it was also an example of longevity and being active up to the last bit. Hersh’s friend was 98 years old.

Bernard quoted the newspapers:

The obvious observation: changes take place in old age. In my parents’ generation, they would be dead by now. I was just reading a wonderful article on aging. In 1970, if you were 65, you could expect to live four more years. Now, if you’re 65, it’s 19 years.

The solution was simple but powerful: Just continue living and as long as you did, there would still be time.

Offspring and acquaintances expressed views similar to those of their elderly actors on death and dying, mainly, regarding the wish to stay independent and avoid reliance on others. Sometimes their stories were identical to their actor’s story; they told the same anecdotes and similar stories of independence and dependence to convey their elder triad member’s ideas on the subject.

Across the narratives, the conversations on issues of death and dying sounded like carefully rehearsed thoughts. They were mostly dealt with on an intellectual, superficial level, without showing signs of anxiety.

Misha’s daughter was an exception. She believed that her mother ought to talk more about death, so she would be prepared when it came. She found it scary to think that death could come and her mother might not be ready:

I'm not saying that people should think about that but I think that when you're 81, you should think about death, at least once in a while. I mean, I'm 55 and I try to think about death. I try not to be so afraid of death. I guess my worst fear would be that my mother would die before she's ready to and would die painfully and with a lot of fear, because that would be something that, I would never get over and that would color the rest of my life.

The golden years.

Initially, when I was examining this significant theme that came out of the narratives, I referred to it as the "golden" years. Used in this way, "golden" was a term that held a certain amount of cynicism in it. How could it really be so good to be old — as good as gold? However, the statements, explanations and descriptions that depicted satisfaction, completion, joy and pride in one's aged life were among the strongest in the present study.

Five out of the eight elderly women and all the elderly men stated in a clear, unmistakably optimistic voice their positive attitudes regarding the goodness and decency of their elderly years. Of the three women, whose narratives were not included under this theme, two were battling with severely debilitating health issues. Nevertheless, they too painted a meaningful life and good experiences of old age whenever they felt physically comfortable and in less pain. The third woman, whose perception did not fit this theme, considered herself lucky to have come this far in life but her despair seemed to have outgrown the positive aspects. However, the optimism, energy and enjoyment described by the elder actors were overpowering. To Arthur, even his own words seemed a bit suspicious and he apologized more than once for sounding so "Pollyannaish." The statements varied from "the best time of my life," to "fairly

well, I can't complain," to the more statistical descriptive, "Generally, I think I am better off than most of society." They all conveyed a powerful sense of well-being.

A deep sense of freedom was a primary emotion for the elderly participants when describing their lives. They felt free to use their time as they pleased, free from unwanted and difficult jobs, free from the need to earn a living and raise a family, free to wake up in the morning and decide not to do anything today. Through the participants' clear understanding of what constituted a happy and satisfied life, it was apparent how lifting the weight of juggling all the aspects of modern life for adults, made retirement and old age a different time.

For Pearl, the taste of freedom was to wake up in the morning, have a cup of tea and a toast and go back to bed until later. She concluded:

It's so good. It's so good. I think this is the best of my time, though I can pick individual events earlier in my life that stand out as being very outstanding events. But in terms of overall, in general lifestyle, the general way I live my life and feel about myself and, and my life — it's the best that it's ever been.

Lidia felt the same:

I know that in my life, it's been a very rewarding time. I retired and the best years of my life, actually, have been since then. I did more traveling, I had different experiences, I fell in love— In terms of my own life, I can tell you it's been the most rewarding time of my life.

Marge provided the details of her freedom:

Well, I no longer have to worry about my work and what's happening at the office. I'm not raising children and I'm not looking for a man and involved in emotional relationships like that, so in that sense, for me, it's a time of being more carefree.

The importance of a regular occupation in defining a good life differed significantly between male and female actors in this study. Of the eight men, five were involved in what they referred to as a substantial pursuit or interest. They all mentioned it as a major contributor to their well-being, their sense of agency and value. Among the women, the three who were still working part time, did not consider it to be a major part of their lives nor was it mentioned as the most important aspect of a good life.

For Jonah:

Life is very good. I am doing what means a great deal to me. I continue to work, which I started 58 years ago and I am very pleased that I have the opportunity to continue to be active in an enterprising endeavor, which has a greater meaning than a job to me. It wasn't a job to begin with and it still isn't. I am able to physically and mentally, I think, continue to do it on a full time basis.

Simon added a sense of magnitude and authority that he had gained through many years at the job he still enjoyed:

I never realized how having lasted in this business could give me such a position, where I am respected as a know-it-all or a giant in the field, all that stuff. You see, part of it is because I've been around so long.

For Bernard, this was the best time of his life and he was not surprised. His childhood and youth were upsetting but then life started to get better and better. He took pride in his working schedule, painting every day in his studio. The only thing that bothered him was that he was not recognized, yet, that at his age his artistic work achievements did not match his aspirations — but who knows? The best was yet to come.

In an almost identical way, offspring seemed to perceive their parents' later years as a

very good time. They sometimes used the same wording and the same examples as their parents did to make their point.

Pearl's daughter agreed with her mother that this was a great time for Pearl, now that she was finally free from the burdens of hard work and the heavy weight of raising a family without a partner. She was amazed by the changes her mother was willing and able to make in her lifestyle to fit her old age:

My observations are that she's very happy. She loves retirement. She's very active in life, she probably is busier than I am. I have to make an appointment to see her two weeks in advance or she's busy. It seems very exciting to me, it makes me happy to know that she has this full life. And she deserves every minute of it. So I'm thrilled. I find it fascinating that you can retire and be busier than you were in your life before that. But it's good busy; she's painting and she goes to the gym three times a week, you know? — Amazing, amazing to me.

Mary's daughter was very well aware of the general gloominess that her mother experienced. However, it seemed to her that Mary now enjoyed a balance in her life that was not there in earlier years. So, although growing old came with a price, it had its advantages as well:

Actually in some ways, she feels better now because she has this apartment and having a stable place to be has such a meaning for her, having come from that; so in some ways, you know, she's happy. Well, she has her income; she has enough for what she needs, for her modest needs. And, she has a place to live. She's not overwhelmed by kids, you know, she doesn't have a job that she hates. She can do what she likes to do. In some ways, her life is more quiet and the way she wants it.

Bernard's relative believed that this was a great time for him: "I think it is very pleasant,

very fulfilling. I think, in many ways, he might think it is one of the better periods of his life. I think he is quite happy.” And she was right on the target in identifying the things that might bother him still:

I think if there was any problem area in his life, it would be having a gallery show for his painting. I think that’s the only part that maybe is not as fulfilling as it could be for him. He’s very happy with the work he’s doing— he thinks it’s among his best— but he doesn’t know when or even if he will have his next show. So, I’m just saying that of all the aspects of his life, that’s the only one that I could see he might feel that could be better than it is. But other aspects — his health, our relationship, the things he is able to do financially — are all about as good as they’ve ever been.

Arthur’s daughter believed, as he did, that life could not be better:

Great, wonderful...He’s free, He’s happy, he’s productive, he has a very active relationship with his grandchildren. He has a wife and a good social life. I think he enjoys every day. He’s involved with his creative work...He is just a very happy, productive, fulfilled person and lots of people love him.

The acquaintances’ group was the most diverse group in terms of chronological age and societal position. However, the similarities in their answers did not reflect their diversities. Like the offspring (and the actors themselves), the acquaintances thought that the elderly person in their triad was having a very good time. They tapped into the freedom component referenced by the actors: lack of restrictions, less concern about other people’s opinions, freedom from family and career obligations. They mentioned the delight their acquaintances found in immersing themselves in true areas of interest and the enjoyment of everyday activities. In some instances, where the offspring saw depression, acquaintances saw thoughtfulness. Where offspring saw

stubbornness, acquaintances saw persistence. Where offspring saw whining and dependence, acquaintances saw trust.

Hanna's acquaintance could not imagine Hanna to be as engaged and up to everyday challenges in any other time but the present. Not having known her in earlier years, she felt that old age became Hanna well. This was partially derived from the sense of freedom she experienced in Hanna: "She feels to me very free today, very free. She lives alone — okay, so there may be the loneliness and the time issue and the aging issue — but she feels very free, she does what she wants."

Pearl's acquaintance felt similarly: "I think just being free and being retired, to do as she wants to do, instead of having a total schedule for every day. I think she enjoys that very much."

Arthur acquaintance did not forget the aging aspect, however:

I think he's having a wonderful time, considering his age. He is now beyond the venerable age. He's always been a dynamic person, all the years I've known him. He still is dynamic and he takes life by the horns and makes it his own. So, I think he is doing well.

Another source of information regarding perceptions, anxieties and attitudes around the actors' aging, had to do with the responses of two of the triad members: the offspring group and the acquaintance group to the question, "How do you imagine yourself to be when you reach _____ 's age?" This question combined attitudes about old age in general, attitudes about personal old age and a spin on the attitudes towards the actor. It turned out that offspring in their mid-fifties who talked about their fathers saw no flaws. They thought that their fathers indeed had a good old age and more than that, they hoped to be just like him when they themselves reached his age.

Hersh's daughter thought that:

I assumed that when I would get to be their age, I would be much more like my father; I will still be in motion and I will keep going. I will have a lot of interests and I will be complaining my head off.

Abraham's and Arthur's daughters marveled and hoped in stronger tones: "I hope I can be the way he is. Still having all my faculties and, you know . . . being able to look back on a good, full life." Arthur's daughter further reflected:

I'd like to have a life like his. I'd like to have tons of people who want to talk to me, be around me, you know, family who loves me. He's a great role model. I mean, there's nothing missing.

The picture was a bit more complicated for the women actors, or at least, in the way their aging process was perceived by their offspring.

Sherry's son did not know what to think about old age, especially his old age. Nor did Pearl's daughter; however, her point of view was expressed in a more poignant way and revealed the complexities of old age that, in her eyes, meant death. Although she perceived her mother's life to be perfect and better than ever at this stage, Pearl's daughter could not imagine herself reaching old age at all. It was all too close to suffering and death. She would rather not age:

I just don't see that I'm going to be an old person. I don't see myself as old. I don't want to get old; I don't want to get older. To me that was not appealing. It's still not appealing. There's a lot of fears, being uncomfortable, being in pain. Getting old means— what does getting old mean? It means that it's going to end, that there is an end. I would say those are the biggest fears: pain, suffering and that it ends. So why do I want to go there? I don't want to go there. I'm not; I don't want to get old.

For Pearl's daughter, part of the fear of old age was the inevitable loss of people you love. As she herself grew older, her mother's deathbed drew nearer and she could not grapple with this fact yet.

Maria's and Mary's daughters believed that their mothers were doing fine physically and practically; however, they saw themselves, when reaching their mothers' age, as doing better, at least, emotionally.

As Maria's daughter expressed:

I hope that my mental state will be different. I don't want — learning from my mother, I don't want to be unhappy. I feel like I have little bit more of a grasp on being able to be happy. So, I hope I have a better grasp of being able to be happy or at least be appreciative of the things that I do have. So I hope, as I age, I don't get unhappy.

Marge's daughter, however, had no doubt:

I hope I'm as active as she is. I mean she's traveled to, I think, all of the places she wanted to see and she seems to see a lot of friends and she's just really busy. I think it's a great example. I don't think older people are treated with enough respect in society at large but, I think, if I could live the way she lives, I could be very happy. In doing everything she does. I don't want to be frail and I don't want to need to depend on other people and I want to, you know, be active.

As in the offspring group, the acquaintances' reflections on their own old age reinforced their perceptions of the actor in their triad. The majority of the acquaintances saw their actors as being a good model; they would be quite happy to reach the same old age as these elders and to actively participate in life the way that they did. Some acquaintances even thought that they could not match the competence that they saw in their elderly triad members.

Hanna's acquaintance, a young woman in her thirties, perceived Hanna to be active, alert, enjoying life as much as possible and she pictured her own old age in similar terms. She hoped to do as well as Hanna did. For her, it was all about what you could do and not what you could not do.

Other acquaintances said:

"She's a good model for me."

"I hope I'm a lot like her — and I hope I find the kind of community she's found."

"I hope I'm like Maria. So far, all I can think of is that I think I will be. I hope I'll be like Maria."

"I doubt that I will reach Arthur's age but if I should, I will not be as competing as he is. For one thing, I haven't been as competing through my life. He's always been more energetic, more vital."

Sherry's acquaintance was among the very few who expressed a sense of despair and anxiety when thinking of her own old age; she hoped to be in better physical shape and to have clearer plans and more resources than Sherry.

For Misha's acquaintance, the thought of her own old age evoked strong associations with hospitals, helplessness and, powerfully, depressing images of being sick and waiting to die.

Old age in general.

"What do you think about old age in general?" I asked all the participants, after a break in the interview and after filling in some demographic information. It was the first time during the interview that the expression old age came up. The shift to a general view succeeded in moving the participants from the individual and personal to the societal and public. This shift happened whether it was the actors group, who were asked to move from their individual

narratives to the collective narrative or the offspring and acquaintances, who moved from their stories about the particular elderly person in their life to the public arena of general perceptions and attitudes. It was clear from the beginning that taking the somewhat distant perspective of talking in general allowed the participants to convey hidden, more ambiguous and complicated views on aging. The tension between reflections on self in contrast with societal images became stronger. When talking about themselves, participants had the option to expand and deepen their narratives; they moved from past to present and revealed other layers of being. Talking about old age in general cleared the way for a, sharper, stronger, yet one-dimensional negative image to surface. In addition, the concept "in general" allowed images of other old people to come forward. If images of other old people were previously used to strengthen the positive aspects of aging, this time images of other old people were less favorable and depicted negative, prejudiced views.

Arthur, consistent with his optimistic views, said:

The word I've been using is erosion. Erosion is not when suddenly something breaks up. The rain comes down and washes the soil; the wind blows and pushes the soil. That's what happens when you grow old; you begin to erode.

Maria let herself be angrier:

It stinks. I have not much to say about old age — and at the end it's sans, sans — sans eyes, sans teeth, sans everything. You lose everything and it's not much fun. I think probably it's very good for people to not remember and, maybe, Alzheimer's is a gift because you don't know anything, you don't know anybody and you don't remember. I guess there are people who can be happy about it. Quiet time, I don't know. Sit back and relax and observe. Watch the world go by. It's like going down a river — maybe a leaf

or something — and then you get pushed to the side and then you're not in the swing of things anymore, just up against the bank. I think old age should be not so debilitating but it is. And it's always filled with these people that can't talk, can't walk and can't see and can't hear and I don't understand why.

Misha expressed anger as well. Actually, this was the only time during the interview that she reacted so forcefully to a question. For her, there was a strong link between old age and defeat, a link she would not connect with herself. However, when asked about old age in general, the negative feelings came right out and depicted fear and anxiety. It seemed that Misha shielded herself from these feelings by directing these animosities toward other old people:

I hate depression and morbidity and people who are sad, sad, sad. I hate that. I hate everything that isn't up and optimistic and cheerful. I hate all that infirmity, that feeling sorry for yourself, the hopelessness, the pessimism. I hate all of that. As to regards to old age . . . it is the depression, the lack of hope that people have. There's nothing to look forward to.

Marge, the spirited and young looking woman, distanced herself from the commonalities in a gentler way. However, when doing so, she strengthened the tension between the attitudes, modes of behavior and perceptions that were out there and those one might adopt and possess as one's own:

When you asked about, "How do you feel about old age?" other people would say that it sucks; that would be their immediate reaction. . . . You have to be brave for being old. You lose your memory, you lose a lot of things but it beats the alternative. You don't have to get older, you can die (laughs).

The concept of old age in general also allowed for the expression of some societal conventions regarding old age — conventions that inflicted pain and a sense of awkwardness and detachment for some participants while arousing an air of contempt and superiority in others.

For Marge, the loss of youth was an important aspect: “Our society does not really revere old age. I feel when I walk down the street, I’m invisible. It’s a society of young people. We don’t value older people’s opinions or experience.” At the same time, she felt very blessed with the things she could still do.

Take me for example. I mean, I can’t believe I’m 78 — to me, that’s an old lady —and here I am, running around, doing things and having busy days. And I’m not the only one who has a full, active life.

David was clear about his views of other old people: “We have neighbors, people who are old and dress like young; some of these women, too. They’re 80 years old and dress like they think they’re sixteen or seventeen. I think it’s silly.” David expressed a common societal convention regarding what was and what was not appropriate for an elderly person. For David, who was 92, the reason was simple but much easier to express when one thought of old age as the problem of other old people. “They’re afraid of getting old. There are some old people who are crotchety, crippled—they’re not very nice people. And these people look at them and say, “Gee, I don’t want to be like that.”

Jayson had an anecdote that depicted old age as a liability:

I know, for example, the gym is reluctant to have me exercising there. At the start of each cycle of classes, somebody sticks a head in to see how I’m doing — just to make sure, you know, that I’m still functioning.

Jayson felt that as the years went by, it was not only the change that he experienced; it

was also the changes others expected him to experience:

I also am much more aware of social attitudes towards older people because I'm hitting it more and more. It's on the radio all the time, the casual references to so- and-so being decrepit: "After all, the guy was 80; what did you expect?" And you hear it from very, very intelligent commentators of various kinds. Then one day you realize you're five weeks away from being 80, as I am, and it becomes very difficult to swallow that stuff. I tend to fly into a rage over it.

It became even harder when this realization hit home:

If you come into a group of young people, you will immediately be classified as elder and it won't always be in a very flattering way. In fact, most often, it will be in an unflattering way and so that's a lost cause too. Not wanted, that's the feeling. And I can see it sometimes with my son too, when he says, "Oh, Dad," if we disagree on something, "How can you have an opinion like that? It's got to be because of your age." So the world tends to shrink from an age point of view, in that more time is spent with older people with whom there are common memories and references. You know, you become sensitive to a certain extent. It's also a growing feeling that the world has moved on in a lot of different directions that I don't particularly care for. And it's a shame but you have to accept it.

Arthur, on the other hand, would not even consider answering any question based on stereotypes:

I'm not a stereotype — unless I'm a stereotype of someone who has loved being alive and plans to continue to be alive until he's no longer alive. I hope there's a stereotype like that and I will be happy to join them! I have to tell you, I watched my grandmother

die badly. She had never achieved anything in her life, except to gather regrets. That's too bad. That's very, very, very much too bad.

Some of the participants expressed nostalgia about other times and even other societies where old age was respected and old people were honored. Jayson elaborated on this:

There is something so unfair about this — well, because often it's an expression of contempt and I think it's very unfair. There are societies in which older people are —the automatic reaction is they must impart years of wisdom, naturally. They've seen so much, they've lived through so much. And not all older people are very wise but some are.

Jonah was not yet sure how he felt about old age. However, if you were singled out for your age, it was not always for the best.

Let's say the traditions which, for instance, the Chinese have that you respect your elders because they are your elders. This country is much more focused on youth culture in many ways. On the other hand, as you noticed, I get on buses and I see signs about leaving seats available for the elderly. Occasionally, I get on and I find a young woman gets up and lets me sit down. So, I don't know whether I should feel flattered or what?

This dilemma, on the one hand, the unpleasantness of being recognized as an old person but on the other hand, getting a seat in a crowded New York bus, was solved by refinement by some of the participants. They claimed to accept the seat graciously because it was an educational stand to allow a young person to perform a kind act.

Many of the participants considered themselves to be liberal and held progressive social views. In that respect, they were aware of the social discrimination that other, less fortunate groups, experienced. For these elders, old age was fine and comfortable but for other elders, it

was probably very bad. Those others were poorer, sicker and less happy. Asking about old age in general allowed the actors to express an objective worry regarding the lives of elderly people in society. It might not have been their own predicament but they were ready to fight for the less fortunate old people.

As Hersh put it:

Our society doesn't provide them with sufficient means to be able to live a kind of comfortable old age that we are living. How much of that is society's responsibility, how much of it is the individual's responsibility? I think is a difficult question to answer.

Again, I think it is the individual's responsibility but, at the same time, society should provide ways and means and incentives to do it.

Jonah said, as well:

For instance, home care. It is a serious problem in this country. Home care is expensive and for average middle-class families, it is difficult to finance it. So, a good part of our social care programs is in the home care area.

The passion that accompanied these opinions seemed related to the elderly participants' background. Most of them grew up in poor families and moved ahead through education and hard work to the comforts of middle class. They did not forsake their social commitments nor their sympathy for people who were not as successful. It served another purpose as well. It was an opportunity to express existing misery in old age but from a safe distance. It was not ones old age but the others.

For Mary, it was all very simple – she felt lucky but was aware that it was not the same for the others: “Well, I wouldn't be a very happy — it's not the golden years that they advertise. I see the people who are sick and poor and older.”

Lidia emphasized the contradictory circumstances as well:

I mean, I'm very lucky that I live in an affordable housing. This is, you know, subsidized housing. Now, that's not true of many people. I mean the housing situation in New York or, for that matter, for the rest of the country, is pretty awful. And, the recognition of the problems that older people have when they are losing their battles, that they need help — I don't know that there's that much recognition in that either.

Marge was more optimistic when analyzing old age as it applied to others:

I think they've, although there are terrible pockets of poverty in New York, I think we have the highest — and I believe this used to be true — percentage of poverty in old people right here in New York City. And we still have pockets of them. But basically it seems to me that the level of — They live at a much higher standard of living today, particularly with Social Security, so that they're more able to enjoy their retired years. And see more and more people are traveling or doing things that years ago were absolutely unheard of.

Abraham was among the few who had no complaints, not about his own state nor the state of the others. When discussing old age in general, he could move freely between his own old age and that of others; for him, the two images were not contradictory.

I think older people are respected in society, their opinions are valued — sometimes discarded because of seeming dotage — but I don't think that's usually the case. I think society treats old people well. I have no objections to the way society is handling my life.

Close in age and in their life achievements and experiences, the offspring and acquaintances groups displayed similar animosity, anxiety and repulsion towards the kind of

degrading, stereotyped “old age in general” that was not directly related to their parent or acquaintance. However, some of them, “never really thought of it,” “have nothing to say about it” and, actually, “don’t want to be there at all.”

For Pearl’s daughter, despite her mother’s great attitude towards her own aging and despite the admiration she had for her mother’s ability to reinvent herself at her age, old age was a dreadful thing. Aging per se was a dreadful thing:

I just don’t see that I’m going to be an old person. I don’t see myself as old. I don’t want to get older. I haven’t wanted a birthday in years. I never wanted to get older. To me that was not appealing. It’s still not appealing.

Marge’s daughter expressed the most common negative views that are popular in our culture; being old is associated with fragility and negligence of basic personal needs:

I mean it’s obviously our culture and, maybe, that we’re impatient with people who move at a slower pace or speak at a slower pace and don’t realize that someone might be very interesting who seems on the surface to be more frail. One woman today, when I went to vote, was just in terrible shape and she was unclean and smelly. In my work I’ve dealt with people who — you know, sometimes their mental illness but sometimes just through age — really kind of lose it and . . . that’s why I feel so scared because that’s scary.

Hersh’s daughter used similar strong words; however, she referred to them as not specifically her words — just what was out there:

Well, I think the disgusting part — I mean, I think people think of people (and I’ll be graphic), as walking around farting and smelling and saggy skin and, you know, hair growing out of their ears and I think all of that is, you know, not untrue.

Mary's daughter made the psychoanalytical association:

People are scared of old age and death. They're afraid of their own death. They don't want to face their own death. They want to think they're going to live forever. And pain, they don't want to deal with pain. I think that's pretty deep. I think they don't want to face their own end. Old age, sickness and death, you know, those things are inevitable but we don't want to face it. I don't want to see it. Well, it's scary. Change is scary. You don't know what to expect. You don't know — I don't know what part of my body I won't have the use of. I don't want to have less energy because I have so many interests that I would like to go at full capacity. I don't know what I lose. I don't have retirement money. I don't have a cushion, so that scares me.

For Misha's daughter, a good old age was almost a utopia:

I think having a good old age, is — you know, by good, I mean healthy, productive and, you know, happy to the end. I mean, I think that that's rare. It's a gift that's given to very few people, very, very few people. Everything in our society is about denial of aging, denial of death. I wish we could all be young, you know, and immortal but the planet would fill up even quicker than it's filling up. ... We all have to die.

Maria's daughter presented an interesting angle that depicted the duality between a medical system, which was committed to prolonging life at any cost and the widespread impression that these elders' lives were not really valued:

I feel that the medical profession is not interested in them. They're old, they're going to die — who cares? That's what I feel about people that are going to the doctor: my mother, her friend, my girlfriend's parents. I mean, they'll do

whatever they can but who cares? They're going to die, they're old. And there's no trying to help really, it's just put a Band-Aid and that upsets me.

Nevertheless, the fear of growing old was present and clear in her thoughts and she felt hopeless in trying to avoid the unavoidable:

It's a cruel trick. You know, because people still feel young. I mean, I still feel young and I'm 60. . . .And your body deteriorates and, you know, you're just not as healthy as you were, things start, you have to give up a lot. Giving up, letting go. So, I don't know, I mean to a certain extent, I guess, you keep learning. But I see so many people just deteriorating and it's just not fair, you know. It's just not — can't people just live and then they die.

The two youngest acquaintances associated old age in general with death. For them, old age meant the ultimate departure — death. It could be that their relative youth (in their thirties) and their corresponding distance from old age, made them see a dichotomy that was not apparent to the middle aged acquaintances. Also, their elderly triad members were, significantly, less healthy than the others and this might have influenced their answers. So for Sherry's acquaintance there were not many options. You were either aware of your approaching death, (which could not be a good thing), or you were wrapped in physical pain and could only concentrate on its relief:

Actually, I don't know, because I actually don't know what happens when a person is old, how your mind works, if you think about death a lot or if you are so busy with your physical pain that you just go with the day and take care of yourself. I'm not really sure.

Marge's acquaintance felt he had a broad perspective on old age. He had plans to work in the area of elder care and was going through aging issues with his parents that enriched his perspective. Still, old age was good when it was not really old:

I like to see an active old age, not the decline. That's the bad part about old age: that you can't live forever and you're going to die, everyone's going to die. Some people, I think, they get to that stage with Alzheimer's, they'd rather be dead 'cause that's not living. So, I would like to continue to be aware, awake, alive, active, using my mind, being in relationships. If I can't do that and I'm in decline, I am not going to like it and I don't know what I'm going to do. I wouldn't like being a very — what do you call it — angry old person. I don't want to be an angry old person because I can't do things. I want to be a helpful old person.

As much as Mary's acquaintance marveled at Mary's rich inner and outer life, she also explained at length the obstacles and hurdles of old age in general.

I think the society — I mean, there is all this youth; people think youth is the hot ticket. And that had better change, is what I think, because everybody is living — not everybody, but many people are living longer. I think one of the things about aging that must be a real shocker is that you start to get treated in this different way. And, I mean, Mary and I haven't talked about that in particular, so I don't know how she feels about it. Maybe it hasn't happened to her. I also think people are scared of getting older, people are scared of disabilities. I think it's a little scary, because . . . when you've lived in your physical planet your whole life, you know, you've lived in your body and the old system is going to start to break down realistically. And, I think, that's got to be very hard to deal with — very, you know, sad and scary. And I think loneliness has got to be one of

the really hard things because your contemporaries are dying off around you. I find that a very scary thought.

True to her artistic nature, she came up with a solution:

I guess that's where that some sort of inner life comes in, whatever that may be for, whether it's a religion or, you know, some sort of other practice or Zen or — I don't know but, maybe, that's something that can sort of take you past, or — not past, but just give you a little sense that maybe you won't just kind of disappear.

Misha's acquaintance pointed out the changes caused by a transformed status:

You're not significant anymore. You're not looked upon to get information unless you have a position of power. You're taken for granted. You're set aside by —and sometimes even shunned by — society. But the elderly are put on the side in a way and are not looked at as, you know, significant anymore, are not listened to what they have to say.

She also reflected on the loss of physical attractiveness:

Deterioration. They are not beautiful anymore, physically beautiful, skin is not tight anymore. And maybe because they forget, you know, they're a little clumsy when they walk, they don't have their reflexes. People never think how they are going to look or if they are going to be around at the age of these individuals. And if they look and they say, "Oh, look at that old man . . . he's drooling or falling asleep or bumping on things or can't hold a spoon or the fork." But they forget that, at one stage in their lives, they will be doing the same thing.

David's acquaintance talked about assuming responsibilities:

I think the elderly are possibly not supported enough by the government. There's not enough done for the elderly. People who don't have enough money have it really tough. It also depends on their health and their relationships with their families. Many elderly have family problems. Kids don't understand them.

Hersh's acquaintance did not consider him as old but had strong opinions about other old people and their lost status in society:

I think in our society, unfortunately, older people are not valued very much. I've always had friends of all ages and I think it's important to do so. But a lot of people just don't want to be bothered with older people. They don't find them very interesting. I think people are afraid of it. You know, people are afraid of losing their looks for sure. Not being seen as desirable any longer. A lot of people just don't want to be bothered with older people. They don't find them very interesting. They're marginalized in our society in the same way that people that, you know, people that are mentally ill or poor people or fat people or, you know, a lot of people that are just not valued, and are really, kind of left out.

For her also, the link between the uncertainty of old age's scares and death was clear:

I mean, it is scary. I have aged physically so much since I've had the baby. I started to get gray hair and wrinkles that just weren't there before. And it's frightening when you see it because you have an image of yourself — probably of when you were 15 or 17 or something that you hold in your mind — and you look in the mirror and those images don't match. But I think that your options are: you get older or you die. That's it. There is nothing else. You can't stand still. You can't stagnate. So, that's it. And I think most people's fear of death is a lot greater than their fear of aging.

For Maria's acquaintance, it was simple. Old age was about pain and needing help from others — two qualities that she did not associate with Maria:

Old age is not pleasant for everyone. When I see older people who really, constantly, depend on others, I feel sad and I always think it's —that's not such a nice life, when people just sit and are in pain or, constantly, need others to help them with every day.

Abraham's acquaintance was as balanced as he was. There were positive things to say about old age; there were perspective, freedom and life achievements to look at:

The good part is, you sure get a lot of perspective in your life. You really have a long view of what your life has been. Having perspective is good, whether what you look back on has been good or bad. It might drive you crazy but as you get older you're independent intellectually. If you're lucky, you're smart enough to understand and accept the good things and the bad things you've done in your life. And once you accept yourself in old age, I think that's a great achievement.

But at the same time, he said: "I don't like old people. I think that older people become too greedy. They're greedy, self-indulgent and greedy."

Arthur's acquaintance also had a lucid vision when describing the worsening of aging: "First you forget names, then you forget faces. Then you forget to close your zipper, then you forget to open your zipper"

So, what do you do? Everyday activities.

Stronger than any theoretical discussion about life and its meaning, participants' tales about their everyday comings and goings presented a clear and most poignant picture of what it meant for them to be old. One of the main factors that contributed to the elderly participants' sense of life satisfaction was a stunning feeling of freedom — freedom from life obligations,

freedom to have a life. Implicitly and explicitly, the lack of restriction was a potent player in their accounts. Although in some ways that kind of life might have seem from the outside limited if not dull.

For Pearl, it was about time to be in this independence zone: "So now, I'm responsible to myself. And it, it feels very free. And I don't feel guilty because I paid, I did it. I did it; I did it for many years." And in a similar way, Arthur explained:

I no longer have a job to go to, so I can ease my way into the next event without guilt.

That's something that most people with jobs can't do; they always have to be somewhere.

I'm delighted that I'm a so-called retiree because I can devote time to things like that. . . .

I don't have to apologize to anybody or please anybody. There's nobody who says,

"You're fired, you did it wrong." I don't do anything wrong any more.

Pearl's example of a simple everyday act, that most of us go through without even thinking about it, offered a powerful glimpse into the essence of this freedom:

I get up very early, I have a cup of coffee and a piece of toast and I go back to bed. And I might fall asleep again and I might not. I watch the news on television from bed and I don't get up again for two hours. Then I get up and have the rest of my breakfast. And that feels — I mean — Queen of the May! This is luxury. Complete luxury.

For most of the actors, the regular everyday events functioned as an organizing starting point. Usually, the most prominent events and interactions were those that entailed a relation to the world outside. The days were organized around one major activity. A day when there was a doctor appointment scheduled or when the cleaning lady came, revolved around that event. The basic activities (e.g., preparing meals, shopping, getting dressed and straightening the house, going over mail and reading the paper) of living took up the rest of the time.

Lidia was busy writing a memoir and she was frustrated. She found that, although, she had now no outside obligations, there was still not enough time:

I realize I get tired late in the afternoon, so the best hours are actually early in the afternoon which is very depressing. If I have errands to do — like going to the bank or going shopping — then I have to do it in the early afternoon. So it makes it tough.

Just living took a lot of time, apparently. Like Lidia, Jayson had a writing project that had occupied him for some time now:

And then after that I got back into a project that I that I had been doing — actually I hadn't been doing it but I was thinking about it for some years. I've researched the whole question and I'm involved in writing that right now. However, I have not been able to grapple with parts of it. I've let a lot of other things get in the way of this; I've slid away from it for the past six months. This is the core of what motivates me at the moment and I haven't been able to do it and I feel very ashamed about not measuring up, to the enormity of the project. . . . I've permitted all the odds and ends of life to stand between me and getting the job.

Between reading, exercising, cooking and taking care of his household, this project provided meaning without having to be completed. It supplied a sense of purpose and accomplishment that Jayson had become accustomed to in his working life. Most importantly, it postponed the feeling of growing old. First of all, it was a young man's project and second, no one could be called old when he had so much still to do.

New York City played a major role in the participants' everyday activities. The abundance of the city's cultural life and the fairly comfortable lives most of these elders led included visits to musical events, the theater, museums, the movies and lectures in various public

institutions. However, the possibility played a bigger role than its implementation. For many, it was more the idea of the possible opportunities that built a sense of achievement, not necessarily the amount of visits.

Some of the participants were still working. Jonah and Simon worked about four days a week. They both held a prestigious and well respected places in the companies they established. Misha still taught a couple of nights a week. Hersh worked from home a couple of hours every day. Maria did some computer research for the company she had worked for many years. Others had a work-like routine; an activity they engaged in a regular basis. Mary scrupulously went four days a week to do art and so did Bernard. Arthur spent a couple of hours every day sculpting. Three more actors were involved in their own writing projects, projects that they found difficult to pursue but more frustrating to let go. Other participants seemed to build their everyday activities in a strict regimen that almost suggested work. The discrepancy between “feeling free” and having an orderly schedule, apparently, did not create a problem. “The idea is not to have a typical day,” said one but when she described hers, she found it quite easy to identify the typicality. Even for Pearl, slow mornings were built into each and every day, not as a monthly indulgence.

Abraham perfected his schedule to the level of almost knowing minute by minute what he was going to do next. When this was pointed out to him, he agreed that he liked his routines and tended to cling to them:

We live a fairly routinized life. We tend to be very routinized people. We do things usually the same way we've done them yesterday and the day before. We awake early and we go to bed early. We are active. We go to museums frequently; we are members of two museums. We go to concerts frequently, we go to the theatre, frequently — when

I say frequently I don't mean three or four times a week but at least once a week we have some event. We go to the movies, we read — although the number of books I read is not as many as I would like because I find that I spend too much time reading the New York Times in detail. But I am able to read and we watch television — what we think are interesting programs. Rarely do we watch during the day time; most of our television viewing is at night. And a lot of time is taken up with — my friends and I refer to it as the quotidian — the day-to-day activities such as marketing. And my wife spends time preparing dinner and things of that sort. That's a typical day. Visiting friends or relatives, occasionally, again when we're well.

Apparently, clinging to everyday routines was not just convenience. Even for participants who valued spontaneity and expressed enjoyment in their freedom, most days' activities were carried out in a very orderly fashion. Participants seemed to enjoy their routines. They marveled when noticing that between the: cultural activities, friends, doctors' appointments, family meetings, cooking, shopping, cleaning and living, there actually was not much time left over.

The offspring's reports of their parents' typical days also depicted the details of everyday living as the main part of the day. Everyday occurrences took precedence. Sons and daughters seemed to be quite accurate when describing the main components of their parents' days, realizing, also, that between the everyday acts of waking up, reading the paper, going out for milk, preparing meals and eating, there was not much time left in each day.

Abraham's daughter had his day laid out clearly:

Well, it depends. On a typical day, he exercises most of the time in the morning. He does little chores here and there, you know, errands, marketing, paperwork. Then they

have lunch and take a short nap in the afternoon. They'll go out for walks in the neighborhood. Sometimes, they'll go to a museum or try to go to a movie. Then they'll eat dinner either out or at home. They'll listen to music, watch something on TV.

Usually they are in bed early. They go to bed early and they get up early. We don't call them after 9 o'clock.

So did David's son: "He still takes joy and pleasure in doing things, such as going out to dinner and speaking with his family, playing chess, tutoring chess and taking it on in interaction with my Mom".

Usually, offspring felt comfortable with their parents' activities and saw it as a general reassurance that life was good for them. However, they tended to add their evaluations of their parents' activities. Maria's daughter was ambivalent when describing her mother's restlessness. On one hand it was impressive, on the other, it seemed sad and unnecessary:

Well, she gets up and the first thing she does is clean. She cleans the cat boxes, she tidies up everything downstairs, she makes the bed, she takes a shower and then she'll come up and eat. And she generally has something to do; there is something that has to get handled. Today the cleaning girl is here, so she's dealing with that. And then she might go shopping, depending on how she feels.

Most of the offspring acknowledged New York City and its cultural opulence as playing a major role in their parents' activities. Offspring spoke with pride of their parents' involvement in museums, the theatre and the movies, reading clubs and various sport activities. From their perspective, life for their parents seemed busy and active. However, as they depicted a rosy picture of life lived to its fullest minutes, offspring also acknowledged that their parents were slowing down, that their days often revolved around one single activity, that they sometimes

spent too much time grappling with an errand they should not perform anymore and that they were often alone.

These acknowledgements did not seem to contradict or interfere with the freedom, interest and enjoyment offspring tended to attribute to their parents. Lidia's relative cracked up when thinking about her active family member:

I mean she's involved in her synagogue . . . she's in at least one or two book groups, she's in another discussion group, she takes classes, she goes on trips with groups from the synagogue. And she tells me about all these things she's doing, so it seems to me that she's busy. She is full of advice on things I should read or catch or see, when they get released, and she is on the cutting edge. Usually the young people say "This is what's happening, man," "You've got to go catch it," and now my 90-year-old Lidia is the one telling me what to watch for. I love it.

The acquaintances group also had a generally good grasp of the everyday lives of the actors in their triad. Their accounts were even more positive than those of the offspring group. Hanna's acquaintance admired her technological abilities:

An 85-year-old woman sitting at a computer, that's pretty amazing. She taught herself to be computer literate. And she talks to people. Age is not an issue through virtual space so much. So she has that intellectual side of her; it's not only technology, that's the tool, but it's the intellectual side of her that she really nurtures.

For Pearl's acquaintance, being active was a major key: "Well, she's very active, both at the synagogue and in the theater and music, movies, dining, she goes to exercise."

Only few acquaintances were somewhat critical of the seemingly easy, orderly flow of their actor's day. Abraham's acquaintance thought Abraham was doing very well, even though it might not have been the most exiting life:

So far as I know, I think he reads some, he goes shopping. Recently he goes shopping alone but in the past they used to go together. I don't think he has a particular activity, I think he just leads a quiet, comfortable life. ... It may not be the life that you'd like to lead; it's not the life that I'd like to lead.

More than any other theme, the everyday activities theme represented the discrepancy between a sense of freedom on one hand and a rigid timetable on the other.

Family ties.

The elderly participants had a lot to say about family ties. The elderly women's stories were the longest. Their stories were more emotional and detailed, containing elaborate accounts of the past (the past, defined as where one came from, parents, siblings, social milieu). Talking about the family of origin seemed to deepen and lengthen participants' stories. Also, women tended to concentrate on their family of origin much more than men did.

Family of choice.

“I feel very content now. All I have to do is enjoy my children, enjoy my grandchildren, great grandchildren — everybody — and that's all there is. “

Most of the elderly participants had a similar, almost cliché, statement to share with me. All except two actors had children; most parents felt positively about their children's achievements and were pleased with their own role in raising them.

For two of the participants, relationships with their children and grandchildren were an everyday reality because they all lived under the same roof. Their offspring, who led less

conventional lives, had moved in with their parents. Although moving back with one's folks as an adult has a negative connotation in our culture, the participants who experienced this found it to be a fine solution. Both parents and offspring enjoyed a renewal of their roles and a sense of mutual help. Moving back in with one's parent rejuvenated their relationship, refreshed previous parental roles (e.g., worries about one's child meals) and at the same time, eased the tension involved in living alone for the actors and the rest of their family. It meant that a stronger and more capable member of the family was present to handle everyday crises. One family considered the possibility of a divorced son moving in with his elderly parents, should their health deteriorate. However, living with their elderly parents and being involved, on an everyday basis, with their parents' affairs, was not the common rule for most offspring in this study.

The two women who lived with offspring were grateful for the advantages of this unexpected companion at that stage of their lives. For Mary, there was no question: "When my daughter moved in with me and when I was sick, she took care of me and I could almost say, she saved my life. I don't know how I could have managed without her." Mary's daughter focused less on the crisis and more on the everyday realities:

I think she's done better since I've moved here, so that makes me feel good, to be able to help her some. I could get a roommate but, frankly, I get along with her. And she is like a roommate. I'd like my own apartment but since I need to have a roommate here, I would rather live with her. Now I'm thinking, "Well, maybe I'll just make a home here. Fix it up, fix the place up and make us — the two of us — more comfortable."

At different levels of intensity, actors expressed pride in their children and grandchildren, told stories of achievements and contemplated the importance of continuity and family. Their

greatest hope was to live to see a good and solid future for their children and grandchildren. Along with this came additional worries, such as the health problems of children, marital problems and financial problems. In most cases the elderly participants felt that they really would not be able to help, unless their advice was asked for. What came out of their narratives were concerns of the comings and goings of their adult children.

However, the narratives seemed to be woven from selected information. Two factors were responsible for the selection: (1) the limited time most of the elderly participants actually spent with their offspring and (2) a strong sense of loyalty towards their children that influenced the information participants were ready to reveal.

The actors' understanding of their offspring's lives was, for the most, gathered from weekly telephone calls, monthly visits and occasional lunches. It was not based on actual events parents experienced with their offspring and often sounded like stories out of a societal script (i.e., what our culture approves of when talking about good elderly parent-offspring relationships.) For many of the participants, offspring were not there for daily activities, daily routines and daily struggles of their parents and vice versa. In the everyday realm, the elderly participants were by themselves, sometimes with their friends and neighbors but not with their children. Even when offspring lived nearby, their visits were too rare to develop an active life together and, many times, the elder actors felt that their interactions were too few and too far apart.

Hanna saw her son for a couple of hours every other Sunday. He was also the main referral for her emergency calls and doctors consultations. Her son, for his part, thought that he dedicated many hours to his mother, carrying the burden by himself, as his siblings were far away.

Sherry saw one of her sons once a month and they went for lunch and had a good time. Her other two offspring lived far away.

Marge knew quite explicitly that, if she became ill, her children would not be there to help her; they did not live nearby. Even those actors whose offspring lived, relatively, nearby, thought that their children had full lives of their own, so that they could not bother them for every little thing. However, the little things, an unpaid bill, a disorganized drawer, a bad T.V. reception were, at times, the main concern for days and weeks for the elder participants.

Pearl represented an ideal model of parents and offspring bond: mature, affectionate relationships with offspring who lived in the same city as she and the assurance that, if she lost her independence, they would step in to take care of her as they had done before when she had a difficult illness. However, at present, this ideal picture consisted of frequent phone calls and twice a month meetings. Their everyday lives were separated. As Pearl put it:

Now it's sort of all wonderful. There is no more codependency; they're adult women with lives of their own and make decisions on their own. And they don't expect me to behave the way they do and I don't expect them to behave the way I do. So the connection is an emotional connection and it's a caring connection. It's much easier than it's ever been. I worry about the time when I will perhaps be less independent and will have to depend on them. That will change it again — but even so, I think we're better prepared to do that in a reasonable way.

For the offspring, the burden of everyday lives meant that living two hours' drive a part was as complicated for maintaining a physical contact as living a long flight apart. It also meant that family ties often remained a source of pride to be talked about. However, that could not be translated into an important feature in the everyday fabric of experience

The other factor, that contributed to the one sided stories told by the elderly participants regarding their offspring, was the strong loyalty elderly participants exhibited towards their offspring. None of them had anything bad to say about their children. As much as the actors were open, candid and even self-critical about other aspects of their lives, they all depicted their children as being good. When a hint of irritation sneaked into the conversation, it was mended right away with a trivial explanation:

He comes down about once every other week. But he's very busy. It's hard to ask him to come more frequently. I mean he is very busy. I can't ask him...

It seemed much easier for offspring to complain about their parents than the other way around. There was no doubt how important one's offspring were. The fact that somewhere in the world, someone carried ones' name and legacy provided elder participants with enormous emotional satisfaction — but this did not boil the water for afternoon tea. However, even when offspring's presence was limited in their everyday lives, most of the elderly participants thought that, in case of real emergency, their children would be there for them. They could not elaborate further on what would constitute a real emergency and what their children would actually do. No one wanted to indulge in this scenario too long. The offspring group — whether resentfully or gladly, from a sense of devotion or a sense of obligation — expressed a similar view, for the most part. They would be there in case of an emergency. However, they too were not willing to look into such a future nor did they have a clear idea of the resources, time and money, they could afford to spend in case of an emergency.

Family of origin.

Many of the elderly participants were not interested in talking about the past. Two factors determined, independently, the number of tales told about the familial past: (1) the

emotional state of the actor and/or (2) the number of unresolved issues in his or her past parental relationships. The more concern the actor seemed to have about life in the present, the stronger was his or her attachment to the past. Stories that depicted complicated relationships with parents or a difficult situation in the family of origin were more poignant, elaborated and more vivid than others. At times it was strenuous to listen when past pain and neglect were expressed as if they had happened yesterday. At other times, it was amazing to realize how strong, continuous and active the forces stemming from the distant past could be in the present. The women in the present study showed a greater emotional diversity and a greater tendency to analyze their present lives in light of their past.

Many of the elderly participants remembered being poor, growing up in the Depression and living in immigrant families. These early everyday struggles affected their lives. Mary remembered being so poor that her family needed to move from town to town, leaving behind unpaid rent. Marge spoke of growing up poor with a frustrated father who could not support his family the way he might have wanted:

It was very difficult for my father; I was very poor and we had no relatives. And my father was an educated, intellectual from Europe who came here with no trade and couldn't do anything. And he saw the shoe makers and the tailors making money and here he is — somebody who knows more and he can't make a living. It was very difficult for him. It was no fun in my house and there was not looking on the brighter side of things, it was looking at the negative side. And it took me a lot of years to turn that around.

Lidia also remembered a cheerless atmosphere at home:

In addition to which, both my grandfather and my mother suffered enormously from bank failures which nobody talks about. And it had an enormous effect on their lives. My grandfather lost all his savings, my mother lost her savings and it changed the whole course of my life. People don't talk about this in terms of life stories but it has everything to do with the course of my mother's life, my grandfather's life and my life. One day she was talking about buying a house and the next day it was impossible. And then, it changed her personality. She used to be a really cheerful person and she became gloomy and matter of fact after that. It was like no recognition of special events or anything. It was just the gloomy day-to-day.

For Bernard it was a motherless, abusive and sorrowful childhood:

My father was rather monstrous. My father reluctantly took me and I was told by my aunt that he never put his arms around me, never caressed me. At that time, I was beaten physically, beaten by this man. I never had a birthday, I was not Bar Mitzvah, I couldn't join the Boy Scouts.

Pearl spoke of the need to overcome a gripping sense of sadness in a household controlled by depression and financial problems. She realized, at an early age, that her parents would not be there to cater to her need for a meaningful purpose in life and that she would have to find other sources of support.

From her lonely being today, Misha continued to cling to the memory of her father's house. There she was appreciated and her love for God was developed and met with matched enthusiasm. As an adult, she felt that her current family did not understand her religious needs and aspirations.

In general, the male actors tended to mention their family of origin as a marker for their own achievements; while their parents had struggled financially in the past, the sons had made it to the comfort of the upper-middle class. While their parents were not able to enjoy the cultural life of their time because of their everyday struggles, they themselves were regular theater goers and museums patrons.

Simon used a cynical tone when describing his parents:

My father was an average person insofar as his dealings with other people and my mother was a little more gracious but not particularly so. I got a little of it from my parents.

They were not outstanding in trying to help the world.

Hersh was more appreciative of his upbringing:

Both of my parents had gone through high school but no more education than that. By the time I was growing up, as I've said, they were reasonably comfortable — although it was in the '30s and during the Depression — but they certainly had a much harder childhood than I did.

The emotional tone of the offspring stories was different. While the parents conveyed, most of the time, feelings of love and devotion, many of the offspring told stories of disappointment, resentment and agony. In the parents' narratives, their offspring were adults to be proud of, their grandchildren were successful and beautiful. Whatever went astray was in the past and not relevant. The elderly participants' loyalty towards their children was especially clear in the stories they chose not to tell. For example, a neglectful child was not mentioned at all, and if mentioned, it was by using flat, short explanations, barely hinting that they have also a child that does not speak to them. Sons and daughters, however, did not hesitate to analyze their relationships with their parents leaving no stone unturned. Using a culturally legitimized

convention that tolerates criticism and disapproval towards ones' parents, many of the offspring did not spare their, unforgiving, sometimes cruel, words. At times, it was difficult to reconcile painful memories of maltreatment, an everlasting sense of unfulfilled needs, a poignant feeling of worthlessness that was blamed on parents' ignorance; a profound experience of anger that was still difficult to conceal, with the image of the vulnerable, fragile, weak, elderly person they were talking about. In some of the offspring's stories, the passing of time did not weaken the power of parent over child; the elder parent might have been physically feeble but could, still, build or destroy his or her child's happiness with a word. The parents, however, did not express that kind of strength and influence over their children and, more than that, in most cases were unwilling to engage in such analysis. Interestingly enough, the same kind of intensity, emotionality and vividness that was obvious in the actors' stories about their family of origin were expressed, by the actors' offspring, when they talked about their parents.

However, the fathers among the actors had it easier than the mothers. For the most part, there were less unfinished business between fathers and their offspring than mothers and their offspring.

The actors had a lot to say about their family of origin and family of choice. Similarly, the offspring had a well-organized conception of their own personal history with the actors, as well as an accurate grasp of their parents' past before they themselves were born. When they talked about their parents' past, they used almost the same examples their parents used when they talked about themselves. The acquaintances group, however, had a more superficial perception on the issue of parents –offspring relationships. While stating upfront the societal conventions about the place of children in their parents' life, most of the acquaintances did not have a close connection with the actors' offspring of their triad. All they knew was what was

told to them by the elderly participants or what they had figured out by reading between the lines. However, the cultural script was dominant and went along similar lines: How nice it is for a man or woman to see their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren prosper and continue their lives with achievements, values and love.

Pearl's acquaintance thought that, "She is extremely rewarded by her grandchildren and her children." Marge's acquaintance claimed, "I think she did a good job with her daughter and she had helped her daughter to get into good schools and encouraged her daughter to become a very good artist. So, she's a devoted mother, grandmother." According to Sherry's acquaintance:

I just think that it's hard and she does very well and when we talk to her she sounds very good, so her big family keeps her going. She talks to her sons and then, of course, their kids and grandchildren. I think that gives some meaning to her life.

Who we are: self and identity.

The aspects generated under the self and identity theme were related primarily to the experience of growing old. Other aspects of self that depicted the scope of the elderly participants' lives, achievements and inner development but were not, directly, associated with old age were not included here.

The not-old self.

The not-old self was a construct that appeared implicitly on more than one level. In this section, I refer to places where people were talking about their not-old experiences and the discrepancy between their chronological age and their emotional self. This discrepancy seemed to be a source of amazement and a source of frustration. On one hand, feeling energetic, curious and fully engaged in life did not seem to change from thirty or more years ago and on the other

hand, the number of years one lived already and the physical changes suggested feeling differently.

Hersh put it bluntly:

I think it's very much a state of mind. I truly don't think of myself as old. Unless I stop and take an objective look and say, "How old are you chronologically, what is your energy level as compared to what it was 'x' years ago, how much slower are you on the tennis court, what can you no longer do that you used to be able to do?" But other than that, I simply do not think of myself as old.

For Hanna, a main support for a not-old self came from engaging in "young" activities, particularly the Internet: "How many people who are 85 can do all the things that I can do? I can do a lot of things. And I do them. How many people who are 85 know how to use the Internet?"

Marge depicted this dilemma vividly: "Take me for example. I can't believe I'm 78 — to me that's an old lady — and here I am, running around, doing things and having busy days."

Misha, who was in poor health during the interview and had battled a fatal disease, was still waiting for her life to happen. There were still many things she hoped to accomplish. Her experience was that she was still in the middle of life and that there was so much yet to accomplish:

I don't really believe that I am where I am today, in this age, because I feel exactly as I did 20 or 30 years ago — which is probably what I've heard before from other people.

But, I'm in a new old days or in old new days. And I'd like to see where it goes.

Because, you see, I think I'm in the middle of my life. I'm in the middle of my life. I'm trying to think what to do with the rest of it.

For some of the participants, the subjective uniqueness in one's not-old self was expressed in the way they perceived the past and remembered old people in their lives. By comparison, they seemed much younger.

As Hersh put it:

I am living very much the life that I envisioned at that time. In fact I'm probably older than I ever pictured myself but, at the same time, not feeling as aging as I recall my grandparents. I'm older than my father was when he died. I don't know that I ever pictured myself in my 80s and, if I did, I probably did not think of myself as being as physically active as I am. I remember as a boy, being very much taken with the fact that, I think it was King Gustav of Sweden or King of Norway, playing tennis at 80. I'm 80; I play tennis two or three times a week.

Hersh considered his perception of himself to be also true for his close circle of friends. In generalizing his not-old self to his social circle, he expanded his own feelings: "We have a couple of friends who are really quite wealthy and older. They are involved, they are active. These are people five years older."

Jonah held on to his image of being active and involved, in spite of his age, as a primary definition of who he was:

I have colleagues who are my age or older and they say "I have this, and I have that, and can't do this and can't do that, I don't care anymore, I've done enough." I don't have that kind of reaction and I don't see any reason to have it. I think sometimes that I'm the grandfather around here. Sometimes, they don't believe their own eyes. I honestly believe that the perception of age or of aging is a mental process much more than anything else.

For some, the not-old self was a more subtle image, one that resided alongside the everyday realities of aging. Sherry battled with deteriorating health and, gradually, was losing her ability to perform different functions of her cherished role as a home maker. However, her not-old self was still present and a very important part of her composition. It helped her to keep, at arm's length, the new images she had to live with but did not necessarily accept:

Certain things are a burden, I'm beginning to find out. I loved to cook and I still like to cook but, sometimes, I get so tired to stand there and my legs begin to hurt and that takes the joy out of it. I used to be manic about it and, I still would be, if I could. So that bothers me. The house is not up to — but I try to say, "I can't help it, I can't help it."

The seasoned self.

The flip side of the not-old self was the seasoned self that, for many, carried insight and comfort that could not be experienced in a younger stage.

For Arthur, a source of joy was the feeling of having completed a major stage of development:

The central thing we all want to know is who we are. Mostly, we spend our lives establishing who we are. I'm 84 years old, I know who I am and that's a terrific relief. Many people reach the point of death without knowing and that's a disaster. I don't have to answer that question any more, it has been answered. So whatever purpose life has, it's been achieved. You put little markers: "I did this, I did this." The things that count, I've done reasonably well and I feel good about that.

A similar seasoned self was expressed by Simon:

When you get older, you develop certain resilience. You realize that you are going to be hit with some certain problems and you learn to live with them. I've learned to live with

them. They affect me much less than they used to.

For Abraham, a central trait in his seasoned self was the repetition of routines. While for some people that might not be enough, he felt that it was just right for himself and his spouse:

We tend to behave the same way. I'm not proud of it; it would be easier for us to be more flexible. As I mentioned, when we go to sleep, we behave as if something dreadful will happen to us if we go to sleep later. Nothing will, of course, but we tend to be creatures of habit. Fortunately, my wife and I are similar in our ways. I think I have become much more so in the past few years. I was much more flexible. I was able to change routines much more easily. I don't know, maybe it comes with the satisfaction of knowing that things are the same way.

The single self.

Two concepts were common among the women in the present study: the single self, (i.e., living without a partner) and the way I look self.

All the men in the present study were married. Mostly single women (out of eight women participating only one was married at the time of the interview), living by themselves for many years, whether divorced, widowed or never married, participated in the present study. Only one married women participated with her husband. The other men's wives did not volunteer to participate, even though, they were aware of the interviews and were qualified, age and health wise, to participate.

The women actors without partners had never planned to be single. For some, reaching this stage of their lives without a partner was a source of agony. Some just wondered how and why life turned out to be like this. However, there was a grain of ambivalence in their attitude. While they felt that they had managed well and enjoyed lives of independence, still, there was

also a bit of self-doubt regarding the emotional price. At times, they seemed to be looking for the balance between a cultural emphasis on couplehood and enjoyment of their total independence.

Misha, passionate as she was about many subjects, used strong words to express her feeling about being single: “Not married, being alone in the world. I hate it! I was never to be alone, ever! And I never dreamed that I wouldn’t be married. Well, it took me a long time to adapt to that.”

Marge, like Misha, did not plan to be single but accepted it more calmly:

Those things are important, whether somebody looks at you or not or whether you have a man in your house. I could have remarried but I needed somebody that was right for me and not just ‘cause he’s a man. And I know a lot of women who did that, they could not live without a man — it’s not my focus. And it doesn’t mean that if somebody nice came along that I would throw him away. I still, when I go to a function, I look around and see if there’s anybody age appropriate or I count how many men are at a function and I see that it’s five to one. It’s not that I don’t see it but that’s the way it is. I don’t any longer say, “Why me?” I don’t say, “Why?” anymore. Well, I don’t think that anymore. To me, I think, “why” is because it’s my destiny.

Lidia rationalized the situation:

There was no man that I ever met that I really wanted to spend my life with. When I really look back on it, I really have nothing to regret because every choice that I made was calculated and I thought about it and I made it consciously. I did the best I could with whatever I had.

Hanna felt she could have remarried but would not:

I know people who've gone through the same experiences as I did and they got married, they're happy, they're fine. Most everybody says to me, "Why didn't you ever get married again?" And they did. And I couldn't. I was stuck on it.

The way I look.

Physical appearance was, for the most part, experienced as a more sensitive factor in women's lives than it was in men lives and was experienced and expressed by the women in the present study in more diverse ways than it was by the men. When mentioned by the men, they expressed their enjoyment of their own good, healthy, still attractive looks.

Sherry, elegant and neat, was sad because, although, to an outsider she seemed as groomed as can be, she and only she knew what was going astray in her house.

Hanna looked at her crippled body and remembered how pretty she was: "Oh. What would I say? I'd say, I used to be a very pretty lady, very, very pretty person. I was really very pretty."

Marge tried to brush off her looks as unimportant but she enjoyed telling anecdotes where people did not believe her age:

So, if people don't look at me, it's the way it is. What can you do about it? About a year ago, a man stopped me and said "Are you so-and-so? You look just like somebody I know." And I said "Well, I guess I'm not" and he said "Well, she's as pretty as you are" and I said "Gee, thanks." So occasionally we get the sense that maybe somebody does look at you but it's not the same. I mean, I turned heads when I walked, I mean the boys would flirt with me, I mean there's no such thing anymore — it's an acceptance of what is. And again, the big lesson that I learn is, it's the desire, the expectation that makes you so unhappy.

And on another occasion:

I went to get a ticket and the man said “Well, you have to show me your age,” and I said “Oh, you made my year, you’re wonderful!” and he said “No, no, no, I really do want to see it,” and I said “Oh, you’re kidding!” He said “No, I want to see your card.” I said “Okay, you’ll see.” And he was astounded and the woman behind me said “I can see why he wants to see your card,” and I’m delighted when it happens. It’s certainly not that you’re thinking, “I’m ten years older,” you know? They don’t look at me and I kind of laugh at it now — that’s the way it is.

The not-old parent.

The elderly participants made few references to the way old age impacted their core being and, although, it did, they preferred to keep a low profile about it. If anything, they talked about the ripened fruits of experience, wisdom and achievements: the seasoned self. Their offspring were even less impressed by their parents’ advanced age and continued to experience their parents in deep, multi-dimensional ways. It was amazing to realize how vivid, rich, complicated and energetic the actors were perceived to be by their offspring. This aspect appeared strongest for offspring who talked about unsolved issues with their parents but even those, who described stable and calm interactions, perceived their parents as powerful, potent individuals. That their parents were now old, needy at times and physically weak, did not change their emotional impact on their offspring. The not-old parent image was stronger than any reality.

Arthur’s daughter puts it bluntly:

You have to remember, you’re asking me — this is going to sound weird — but you’re asking me questions that are natural questions for old people but one of the

remarkable things about my father is that he really doesn't think of himself as an old person, so I don't really think of him as an old person.

Jonah's daughter felt the same way; nothing had really changed in her admiring perception of her father:

He's continuing to do the things he cares most about, to negotiate and be involved in policy and strategic development. I think there's been a great deal of consistency. He continues to be very caring; he continues to be very passionate about issues. I haven't seen a change. And I think he leaves some of the young men and women he works with in the dust. I think it's a good lesson to them as to what one can accomplish. This is the way I have always known him. I remember that he was that way as a young man; he has been that way my whole life. And he almost never loses his cool. He's very well balanced and very well grounded.

In spite of criticizing and being hurt by what she saw as her mother's depression, Maria's daughter actually perceived her in a flattering light. She depicted a fighter, not-old image of her mother:

So she's very sharp, extremely. Too sharp, you know. Well, she's so sharp and she can't do all of the things that she wants to do because of her physical body but her mind is still doing all of them. I come and she's standing on the kitchen counter watering the plants- very, very independent, fiercely independent. She's buying things on the computer. I think she sometimes has more energy than me. She wants to do this and we have to go out on the weekend and we have to buy this and we have to buy that. And, you know, this has to happen and that has to happen.

Maria's daughter saw her mother as always alert and ready to try new things. She admired her mother's unending curiosity and passion for life although, at times, it was frustrating: "I could see my mother: 'Oh, I've never done that. I'd love to do that. I can't do it now.' This is what's upsetting her. She can't do what she wants, whenever she wants."

Mary's daughter experienced her mother's old age as a place of tranquility, calmness, minimal obligations and permission to spend most of the day in recreational activity. She felt that her mother was better off in old age:

I think that my mother has been depressed her whole life. It's kind of like a low-grade depression covering her life; I think it's throughout her life she's been that way. I think she's actually got more friends now, though, than she did when she was younger. . . .

Well, she has her income; she has enough for what she needs, for her modest needs.

And, she has a place to live . . . she doesn't have a job that she hates. She can do what she likes to do. . . . In some ways, she feels better now, so in some ways, you know she's happy.

The sad self.

A common stereotype of old age is that old people tend to be sad and gloomy. This gloominess was not apparent in the elderly participants' demeanor or in their narratives. Some offspring commented on their parents' sadness, however, it was always daughters describing mothers and the gloominess was never ascribed to old age.

Maria's daughter experienced her mothers' melancholy as the most disturbing part of their life together. She referred to it more than once throughout the interview:

She's not happy. I guess sometimes she is but I wish she were, I wish — Okay, she's not happy. I wish she were more happy. I wish she was happy but you know what? I don't

think she's ever really been happy. You know. So, maybe, how can I expect her to be happy now?

Misha's daughter was also disturbed by her mother's depression and, most of all, by her own inability to soothe her:

I think my mother is very depressed and I think she has been depressed for a long, long time. But she's in total denial about it. And, you know, anything I say to her to try and point something out for her, she's going to take the wrong way. And I know that I shouldn't. Nothing I say to her can help.

Initially, I assumed that the acquaintances' group would be mostly prone to negative stereotypes of old age. However, if any, their understating of the elderly participants was positively biased.

Hanna's acquaintance saw no trace of the depression, pessimism, tiredness or slowing down of faculties that were so obvious to Hanna's son and, to some extent, to Hanna herself:

I think she takes every moment in a very meaningful way. And she attempts to make the most of it. I believe she's a very passionate individual. And I feel that she's holding on passionately to every moment. I get a sense that she's always in a hurry. You know, she doesn't want to spend time on things that are not important, not perceived important in her eyes.

Marge, in her acquaintance's eyes, was a model of the way to live as an elder:

I admire that a person who is older — she doesn't look her age — so, I know her from the synagogue and she's always pleasant, always going someplace, always doing something. To think about growing older and being alive, what being alive... being alive is important, as long as I have life. I know Marge has that to her: alive. And at her age,

mid-70s or whatever, she likes her liveliness. And I know she doesn't want to lose that.

I don't want to lose that.

Mary's, Misha's and Maria's daughters all looked upon their mothers with worry.

However the acquaintances of these three women saw no trace of depression or moodiness; they only saw tenacity and endurance.

Mary's acquaintance saw her for the artist she was:

So I think that she's great at dealing with things but, also using, I'm going to say, the life of the imagination to make things easier. Which is one of the things I think I do also. It's one of the things we really like about each other.

Misha's acquaintance was not aware of the turmoil in Misha's life nor her battles with diseases and financial hurdles:

She seems to be okay. I mean, she's friendly, she always has a great disposition. She always has a smile in her face, she's very friendly, she communicates very well. She's like me — very huggy, huggy kind of person. And she comes and asks you, "How are you doing, how are you, where have you been?"

Maria's acquaintance perceived only the good sides of Maria:

I don't see Maria every day but whenever I see her outside, she never complains. She will say here and there, once in a while, a thing but, really, she is not a person who complains. She seems fine when I see her. Again, every time I see her outside she is doing something.

Beliefs and values.

Under the beliefs and values theme I presented two subthemes that came from the elderly participants narratives and that were most related to ways of dealing with the aging process. I concluded with the place of organized religion in the participants' narratives.

Living in the moment.

Zen in its simplest form implies meditation, full awareness, immersing oneself in nature, reaching a state of calmness and peace. One of the tools in achieving Zen is concentration on the present. Living in the moment is a powerful idea. Generations of Eastern gurus and Western therapists have considered it to be the true art of living. The future for the elderly participants had many uncertainties. The idea of living in the moment became powerful and limiting at the same time.

Pearl looked back at years of hard work and responsibility, when her needs were fulfilled only after all the rest was covered. Now the focus was finally on herself and this was a valued change. However, how long the now would last was uncertain:

What I say is, I have to live now. Now, now while I can, I have to live — and that's what I work on. I work on the balance between living as much as I can without stressing myself out more than I need to, without using my body more than I need to — but at the same time, using it as much as I can. And keep finding that place.

David repeated this message a couple of times:

I go through life optimistically, one day at a time. And we do the best we can. One day at a time, that's what I believe. Not too many things, as I said; one day at a time. I'm not concerned with things I forget. Take one day at a time and enjoy it. Accept life as it comes, one day at a time.

Abraham enjoyed a predictable schedule and his daily activities were arranged almost to the minute. This concentration on the present had its merits:

I live day to day. You don't think about it. You take care of the day-to-day activities — you enjoy every moment when you can and you don't think of the grimness, unless it imposes itself upon you. Otherwise, you can't dwell on it; you grab every enjoyment you can and enjoy every moment you can.

For the greater good.

From a different angle, concentrating on the greater good for one's society achieved a similar goal: dissociation from an uncertain future. The elderly participants tended to move to the larger arena of social matters. Especially for the male actors, the greater good was a concern, a passion and sometimes a disappointment.

For Jonah, the boundaries and achievements were clear. He had worked all his life and continued to work well into his senior years for an important and unique nonprofit organization. The knowledge that his work had meant a great deal to the success of his organization was an ongoing source of satisfaction and pride.

For once, Simon's cynicism did not mask his sincerity as he reflected: "I think that religion consists solely of helping your fellow man. My meaning is very simple: help your fellow men."

Hersh also summed it up as a clear principal:

I would say it's what was described as, "the greater good for the greatest number," would be my goal, my purpose. It's living by a rule that says: "Do not do unto others what you would not have done unto you."

Religious activities.

Many of the elderly women mentioned participation in organized religious activities as a meaningful and substantial part of their lives. They were active synagogue members, attending religious services regularly and taking part in the intellectual, musical and social activities at their local synagogues. However, none of the men participated in such activities. The Rabbis in my synagogue started a movement called “the return of Adam” in which they were trying to reengage men in the religious life that seemed to be dominated by women for the last decade. Marge believed that God was with her, watching and helping her even when she did not believe in him; Simon thought it amazing that intelligent people fell for such ideas. Misha clung to her childhood and youth in an orthodox household and took pride in being the only religious person in her entire family. Hersh questioned what religious faith could possibly add to the experience of growing old.

While 13 of the actors participated in the discussion on beliefs and values, (six women and seven men), only a few of the offspring and acquaintances mentioned this theme when reflecting on the elderly participants’ lives.

Misha’s daughter and David’s son were each aware of their parent’s belief systems and of the importance those systems held in their daily affairs. However, David’s son did not see how his father’s ideas would help to comfort him if his health deteriorated severely. Misha’s daughter, on the other hand, felt that her mother’s religious background had helped and continued to help her through some of the tough and depressing issues she faced.

Pearl’s acquaintance merely stated that religion was an important part of Pearl’s life. In a similar fashion, Marge’s acquaintance thought that Marge understanding and practice of Eastern philosophies was a major player in her well-being.

And what next? The future.

The information is out there; life expectancy, geriatric medicine, the morality and ethics of prolonging life are just a few of the topics on the social agenda. The images are also part of our culture on aging: Old people in wheel chairs, old people who breathe and are being fed through tubes, old people deteriorating because of neurological deficiencies. Last but not least, although most people would prefer to die peacefully in their homes, only a few will.

One of the planned questions in the present study, “How do you see yourself in five years from now?” was designed to tap into the near future and bring to the surface one powerful issue of being old: the seemingly realization that one walks an unavoidable path that leads to death. Although a realization of life at any stage, still, it is experienced more forcefully in old age. People may experience this in different ways. It might be easier and calmer to some and devastating to others. This question was planned to understand, from a different angle, what attitudes and coping mechanisms the elderly participants possessed when making sense or just giving account of their lives in old age. In contrast to the emphasis on the present, the question, “How do you see yourself in five year from now?” brought the near future even nearer. I sought to explore, what seemed to be the darker sides of the elderly participants’ being without labeling them as disease, weakening and decline. Even if everything was just great at present, the statistics would imply that things might get worse.

Indeed, for most of the actors’ group a five years from now time zone evoked, in obvious or subtle ways, thoughts about a future that might be affected by decline and death. However, this discourse did not indicate a significant shift from the actors’ usual emotional tone. For the most part, it was a continuation of their story and not a measure of their anxieties or practical

concerns. Loyal to their core experience that life these days was fine, if not great, most of the participants believed that life five years from now would not be that different than it was today.

Jonah wanted his fairly busy schedule to continue as it was:

If I am roughly in the shape I am in now, I hope to be able to do what I am doing now.

To the extent that I can be physically and mentally capable of continuing to be of some help, I hope I will have the opportunity to do it.

And Marge, who sought for new adventures, felt that there were hopefully more in store for her. In the same breath, she brought up the possibility of physical deterioration and rejected it:

Five years . . . I hope I'll still have the energy to travel or maybe I will have—Well, I don't think I've used up my wish list. I don't see much different; I see myself being slower, probably. I don't see me unhealthy, I see me healthy. I really don't see much different.

For Abraham, it was a mutual wish for him and his wife:

As I said, I am happy to have achieved this and I hope to get older. As I said, I was 84 last month and I have no idea how long I will be here. I would love to see my children prosper and my grandchildren achieve what they want. I would like to be around to see these things happen and for my wife and me to be here to do it together.

Simon made fun of the question and the death issue altogether. He thought that in five years from now he would be:

As healthy as ever, I'm going to be immortal. Still fighting the battles to help improve society and having very little result because of an impossible political situation and because of the innate, wonderful ability people have not to use their brain.

Some participants had vivid examples of elderly people who maintained a stable and healthy life style. Bringing up these examples when talking about the future was another way to distance and ease the anxieties about aging and death.

Jonah talked about a friend who was even older than himself and who continued to be engaged and active:

I have a colleague who was born in 1914 — so today he is 93 years old — and he's still active in an important charity organization. And he still gets on a plane and flies to meetings. So, this is what I hope to do.

At her day center, Mary saw people who inspired her with hopes for herself:

If I live, I hope I can do the same things that I do now and that I will be able to go to the Center. I see people who are sick and I see people, who are doing OK, people in their 90s who are still somewhat active and I hope — I don't know how I'd feel about it. I look up to them. I feel encouraged to see that people who are older than I am that are traveling and that's good.

A few of the participants saw the five years from now question as an opportunity to speculate on options they had not yet explored. Lidia wanted to develop a writing career; this had always been her dream and now she might have the time to do it. Misha was an aspiring writer and musician who, while overcoming a complicated disease, hoped also to conquer new territories:

OK, there must be a reason why God spared me. And spared me in the condition that I'm in, which is, you know, very good for my age, I guess. And so I think it probably is to finish the creative work right now.

Bernard too hoped for a future of artistic endeavor where he would be recognized for his work:

If I'm lucky, alive, five years from now, I feel I've sort of reached the epitome of possibilities. If by some miracle, the gallery should open another show and it should get good reviews and I open up the kind of artist's life that I can have, in which I'm not waiting for years to emerge into the world and disappear after three weeks . . .

Visions of a daunting future did not escape a few of the participants. These actors were those who already battled with health obstacles.

For Sherry the future was scary, pure and simple:

It scares me. I'll be five years older. I think I'll become stiffer, less agile, not as able to do the things that I'm able to do now, which isn't much. I would like to feel more protected, when having plans for the future. And I keep saying, "What are we going to do?" I decided I can't deal with it, what will be, will be. I try to live that way. I am not always that way, when I start worrying about what is going to happen to us. So, I try not to go over the mountain or down the cliff, whatever.

For Arthur, the question of five years from now was not relevant. He was content with his life right now and chose to see this as an indication that his future would be just as happy. However, Arthur was one of the few participants who took statistics to heart:

I think if you were talking to a younger person, you would get an answer that makes more sense. I think it's pure rhetoric to speculate what I will be doing five years from now. My life expectancy begins to diminish.

Alternate living arrangements.

The next and, at times, unavoidable stage for elderly people is, often, the shift from living independently in their homes, to living with some level of assistance. The level of assistance may vary, depending on the resources and the health condition of the person. When conditions

allow, a person might stay in his or her house with a live-in caretaker. There are different kinds of assisted living available when staying in one's house is not possible. Assisted living houses have a higher status. Usually, they involve every day services like home maintenance, cooked meals and in house medical assistance. However, residents live in independent apartment units and are not supervised on their daily affairs. Assisted living establishments have usually hospital-like wings to house residents that experience a change in their health status. Nursing homes are last on the list. Most nursing homes are institutions that control every aspect of their residences' lives. Nursing homes may also offer departments that will help residents who have experienced yet another failure in their health and need extensive palliative care.

For the elderly participants, placement in a nursing home would be perhaps the worst thing that could happen to them. Whether a public, government run institution or an expensive private facility, a nursing home was seen as a place where (as Pearl said), "Everything is imagined for you."

Few participants brought up the issues of alternate living arrangements during the interviews. I would have thought that everyone would have a plan for when things will start to change. Not everyone did — or at least, not everyone was ready to talk about it.

Two of the women were living with their daughters. Although this was not presented as a life-long arrangement, it was clear — at least to the daughters — that they were there to stay. Surprisingly, this did not have a significant calming effect on their mothers' thoughts about the future; their thoughts were not profoundly different from other participants who did not have that special arrangement. Both of them did raise the issue of assisted living, although not in too many operational terms.

Mary thought that it might be convenient and less lonely to move to such a living

establishment, although she did not think it was within her financial means:

Well, I sometimes wish that I could live in a — what are these places called? It's almost like hotels — assisted living. I have been in these places. They have their own little apartments and they can come and go, they can eat a meal if they want to or they eat in the dining room and they have the housekeepers that come and clean the apartments. They do little things. That's not bad. One of the people who come to the center — each person would be different — but she went to that place, she seems much more cheerful.

A nursing home, though, was a different story:

Yes, I prefer to stay home because I can come and go as I wish and, as long as I don't need a constant care — Because I saw how the people in nursing homes live and have to eat what they're given.

Maria's response started out loud and desperate and ended logically:

Where do we go from here? I don't want to go someplace and sit on the bench and vegetate. I want to be able to do something and it's not easy anymore. And when you don't feel good, you don't feel like doing the things you used to, like I used to take art classes and things like that — Oh my God, I don't know. I don't know. I don't want to look. I don't want to think about it. I just want to go one day by one day. I want to make sure that in five years I'll have enough money to survive on. But in five years, I'm sure I'll have something that I'm not going to like. I'd like to be staying in my own place. If I have to go to assisted living, I guess I would do that. I don't want to be a burden on my daughter. I don't want to burden anybody. If I get really sick and then just go in — you know, some place that takes care of you. But I hope I don't have to do that.

Hanna expressed the most determined view about changes; she would not tolerate them and therefore she did not have any plans if they were to happen:

Oh, I don't want to go on much longer. When people say to me, "To 120," I say, "God forbid." I mean enough. After all, I don't want to move into a home, a retirement home. I don't want to have somebody staying here with me. And how long can you go on without doing that? I don't want to move into a nursing home, I don't want to end up in a wheelchair; I don't want to have pain like my husband had.

Pearl and Marge each had a plan for the future. Marge did not like to talk about it:

I don't really think about it because I am provided for — I have long-term health insurance, I have the room that has all my things in case I need it and, then, that's it. I really don't think about it but you're making me think about it. So that's what I'm saying: five years from now, I'll think about it then. It's not that I have been irresponsible and have not provided for it but, once, I did, you know, yeah. And as I said, hopefully, it'll be like it is now.

Pearl was much more concerned. In a poetic way, she described her feelings about the future:

On a day like today when the wind blows fiercely and I'm walking on the street and, and — Clump, clump, you know, one step at a time — I say, "In 10 years, am I going to be able to do this?" I don't know. And I don't know how I'm going to feel about it. And that's something else I've found through the years: you don't know how you're going to feel until you're there. You can imagine but you don't know. So I don't know.

However, Pearl did not leave the discussion there, in an unknown zone:

That becomes a problem. I'm not sure. I worry about it a lot. I think about it a lot. And that always helps me when I — Even in the past, when I was worried and afraid of what

was coming, I would — I have a very rich fantasy life and so I make up scenes for myself of how it would be. I paid for a long-term policy that would allow me to have a caretaker in my house, so that I wouldn't have to leave it, if I didn't want to. It takes a big chunk out of the money I have but I feel — But that's important to me, that gives me — If I don't want to leave, I won't have to leave, no matter how invalided I become and how much help I need.

Only one of the men spoke about a time of deterioration and, when doing so, he referred more to his wife than to himself. Hersh felt that his wife might need such a place; he had already checked out the possibilities and was ready to do the move. It seemed easy for him to contemplate this move and he felt potent and ready to change. While the future ahead might be debilitating for his wife, it might not necessarily be so for him.

I asked the two other groups of each triad, the offspring and the acquaintances, the same question: “How do you see _____'s life in five years from now?”

Arthur's daughter did not foresee change: “I see him pretty much doing more of the same. You know, having fun, having interesting thoughts, interesting relationships.”

Hersh's daughter saw a steady, natural movement that, hopefully, would not change the essence of Hersh's life:

Assuming sufficient health to keep going, I would say not all that different but way slowed down. And I'm sure that he would keep all components of it. Again, I'm assuming sufficient health and mobility. But it would be less of everything: slowed down, more bent over, more gray.

Lidia's relative had no doubts about the future:

If she lives that long, she's going to still be writing and still be trying to sing and still be

trying to visit things and talk to people and participate. I think if anything severely impeded her mobility, she would still be active to whatever extent she could be.

For Maria's daughter, there was hope in the near future. If a current health problem were to be cured and some emotional turmoil could be put aside, things might even get better:

I actually hope it gets a little better and she won't have bouts of vertigo. I hope she's at least as good as she is now. I certainly can't imagine her brain getting —she's as sharp as a tack and I think that's going to stay that way. Except that it would be nice if she got a little happier, you know, maybe a little bit more. I'm working on her, you know.

A recurrent concern was that parents would suffer tremendously if they needed to be placed in a nursing home or cared for by their offspring or a caretaker. For offspring as it was for parents, there was more wishful thinking ("We'll deal with it when and if it happens"), than any concrete plans involving allocations of resources, checking places, etc.

Abraham's daughter summarized the consensus simply:

I think his main fear is that he doesn't want to become a burden to people, so he hopes that he will be able to live independently. But if the time comes when he can't, I would hope that we could work things out so that he can have as much dignity as possible.

Arthur's daughter could not really imagine her father growing older:

I hope he has a life, God willing. I don't know, he doesn't really seem to age. You know, God willing, he will still be healthy. He might be moving around a little more slowly, although he doesn't seem to have slowed down much.

For some offspring, the future meant death. They dreaded the possibility of deterioration and the practical and emotional pressure it would put on them. For Pearl's daughter, five years from now was associated with Pearl's death and the desolation her death would cause. Pearl's

daughter could not bring herself to think of her mother passing away, not being there for her.

However, options and practicalities were there in the background, feeding one's fears and hopes. Another of the planned questions brought up a possible future afflicted by deterioration. The question was, "If needed, could you help your parent in his or her physical needs?" When the possibility that one's parents would need such care surfaced, the picture changed. Offspring did not try to dismiss the subject as irrelevant. Their responses were, sometimes, fragmented but always clear:

"I will hire someone to help her or him."

"I will suggest they move in with me."

"I will do some part of it and hire people to do another part."

Although most elderly people end up being moved to nursing homes, this possibility is the hardest one to contemplate. Most offspring emphasized that they knew their parent would not want to go to such an establishment. Offspring also declared that they would never put anyone in a nursing home unless he or she really wanted it. However, reality changes over time and as Pearl said: "You can't really know how you will feel when it comes." At the time of the interviews, the elderly participants and their offspring considered nursing homes to be the worst option possible. Placement in a nursing home would mean that the elder had reached a stage of deterioration. It meant that the actors would become dependent and their offspring would be forced to take upon themselves new responsibilities that they would rather not.

The offspring group could be divided geographically between the ones who lived in the same town as their parent and the ones who lived far away. As a self-selected group, the offspring that lived in New York City and its vicinity were already prepared for the possibility that they might need to be their parents' main helpers. They differed from each other in the

amount of resources they had available and the level of readiness they demonstrated. However, whether motivated by gratitude, guilt or sense of obligation, all the offspring said that they would be ready to offer help if needed. Initially, they did not recognize the future as a time where their concrete help would be needed, however, once their awareness of that possibility was raised, they were clear about what they would need to do. Offspring declared themselves ready to honor their parents' wish to stay in their own homes and offer any help needed to make that happen. As Hersh's daughter put it: "If someone wanted to do that, that's fine but I would — as long as I have the physical ability or financial means or whatever — I would not take a parent of mine there [nursing home]".

For Misha's daughter, taking care of her mother was difficult but there was no doubt in her mind that she would do what was needed. "But you know what? We'll deal with it. Whatever will be, will be. I'm becoming more fatalistic. I'm beginning to realize that, you know, I tried to control everything but it didn't work."

Modern life presented a poignant dilemma for offspring. Jayson's son believed that:

Well, if I had to, I would. I mean, could I? Yes, of course. I mean, one doesn't want to have to do that but, you know, family is family. Well, I mean, if you're a mensch, you do the things that you have to do whether you like them or not. You know, he certainly did things for me when I was small, so — I mean, just the question is, how would I go about doing that?

Jayson's son felt that he could and would help his father with his physical needs, if necessary, but they lived thousands of miles apart and it was not an option for anyone to relocate. Implicitly, this meant that, if a time came when Jayson needed constant care, his son could not provide it for him. Jayson's son represented a group of offspring who lived far from their

parents (or alternatively, whose parents lived far from their offspring). When speculating about the future, about a time when it would become too late to incorporate the parents' needs into their offspring's lives, the options were limited. Offspring thought that they would try to visit more often and, if possible, they would send money but they did not see how they could do anything more. The dilemma was sometimes impossible to resolve. On one hand, were the offspring who lived far away from parents, had jobs and raised families of their own and were unable or unwilling to relocate. On the other hand, were the elderly parents who might need permanent care or, at the least, reliable supervision. The difficulty of the situation could explain, at least in part, why offspring and parents were reluctant to talk about a future that might entail aging difficulties and did not mention foreseeable problematic future. Only when explicitly asked, did they talk about the ways they could help their parents if their parents' health should fail.

The acquaintances group's thoughts about their ability to help the actors with their physical needs displayed a normative range of what was possible, feasible and to be expected from them. A few instantly picked up what "physical needs" might entail. However, they were also the ones who said clearly and directly that they could not help their elderly acquaintances with bathing, feeding, dressing, etc.

Hanna's young woman acquaintance said:

It's very hard for me. I'm not a natural caretaker. In fact, I like when people take care of me. The physical taking care, like giving a bath, feeding — it depresses me. I'm not a natural caregiver in the basic needs.

And in a very similar way, Arthur's middle-aged male acquaintance explained:

No. I might actually participate in hiring somebody but I don't think I could do that

myself. I have very poor skills in that kind of nurturing — feeding him or changing his clothes or making his bed. My definition of friendship doesn't embrace that.

At the other extreme were participants who depicted a sense of duty that indicated their willingness to be involved in taking care of bodily needs, if needed. Their approach was that, if someone needed your immediate assistance, you gave it. However, for most of them, the question seemed to be hypothetical, something unlikely to really happen. Their answers displayed a societal norm of what good people should do.

All acquaintances were ready to lend a helping hand with daily activities that were more remote from bodily needs, such as shopping, bringing books from the library or getting the medications from the pharmacy. There was also a very real issue for elders who lived away from their immediate families; many acquaintances expressed not only the will but the experience and the expertise needed to accompany people to the hospital. Marge's acquaintance said:

I'm very good at bringing people to hospitals and bringing them home. I'm an expert on that. I've done that quite a few times, so I would help her. And I know about caretaking, home care, finding an agency who supplies home care workers.

When I included the question about helping the elderly participants in their physical needs, the goal was to explore basic attitudes that might go beyond regular, everyday encounters. Offspring, for the most part, were clear about what was expected of them and what they expected of themselves. Acquaintances displayed a similar understanding of their role in the lives of their elderly triad members. If anything, the narratives about this topic strengthen the dichotomy between stories of personal aging as opposed to stories of old age in general.

The findings presented in this chapter were drawn from the narratives of the three groups of participants and, for the most part, were positioned to bring out their unique voices. The next

chapter will deal with the ways these voices are interwoven and intertwined within the general discourse on aging.

Chapter Four: Discussion and Conclusions

Themes of Meaning, Revisited.

The main findings in the present study were the themes that emerged from the elderly participants' narratives and the way these themes were talked about in their acquaintances' and offspring's narratives.

Two major observations were found in the present study:

1) There are striking similarities between qualitative and quantitative studies in findings on old age issues and

2) There is a profound discrepancy between the positive perceptions and experiences of elderly people on their lives in aging as they were reported in different research paradigms, including in the present study, and the vast literature on negative aspects of old age in general.

The identification of old age as a distinct developmental stage, gender differences, limitations of this study and suggestions for further research will conclude the chapter.

The themes that emerged from the present study were (1) reflection on self, parent and acquaintance at present (an introductory theme that will not be discussed in this chapter separately) , (2) conditions of aging, (3) everyday activities, (4) family ties, (5) self and identity, (6) beliefs and values and (7) the future. These themes captured the elderly participants' thoughts and were reflected in their offspring's and acquaintances' narratives as well. They expressed the meanings that the elderly participants ascribed to their lives and were validated by Offspring's and acquaintances' narratives. Across comparable qualitative studies, the various methods of gathering data did not yield very different themes. The themes were about aging, self, family, significance of past events, regrets and accomplishments, values and beliefs. For example, Kroger (2002) analyzed 14 individuals' life stories in order to define and establish

identity processes in late adulthood. The themes she reported dealt with vocation, family, friendship and community. Rohovit (2000) interviewed 10 women about their lives and found similar themes: relationships with family and community, the challenges of a changing body and gaining perspectives. Thompson (1993) opposed the traditional study of aging as disease and pathology and found themes of work, leisure, grand parenting and intimate relationships that formed the meanings of later life experiences and self-perceptions.

From a quantitative research paradigm, the source of meaning profile by Reker and Wong (1988) consisted of items that formed the themes: humanistic values, involvement with family and friends, feeling financially secure, meeting everyday basic needs, participation in leisure activities, participating in hedonistic activities, preserving culture and tradition and interest in social cause. Penick and Fallshore (2005) looked at the interaction between level of activity, sources of personal meaning and expressed satisfaction with life in elderly participants and showed similar ways of ascribing meaning.

Although the present study favored the narrative method as a tool to elicit meaning, the similar findings in different paradigms validate and strengthen the findings in general and each method in particular. Research methods that explore, measure and generalize human behavior have more in common than might be perceived. The narratives gathered in the present study depicted general life themes that were embedded in the reality of lives in the process of growing old, while illuminating the individuality of each elderly participant. Some of these themes were related to the experience of life in general and were not specific to old age, however, their position in old age brought out the uniqueness of experiencing these meanings while growing old.

Conditions of aging.***Health and sickness.***

No matter what age or developmental stage one is in, the integrity of the physical body is a focal point of anxieties and hopes. This is even more potent when one is afflicted with a chronic or life threatening disease. A central theme in the literature of aging depicts growing old as growing sick; much thought and research is dedicated to the way health issues affect older people. Old age is viewed as a sickness that attacks all areas of body and mind and most disciplines are working to find ways to prevent, delay and, ideally, cure individuals and protect society from an unwanted old age (Nuland, 2007). In the present study, however, health and sickness played a minor role in the participants' narratives. If dealt with at all, it was dealt with defiance; health issues may be inevitable, annoying and even scary but they were part of life. Participants of all groups were reluctant to prioritize health issues above other topics. Actors felt that as long as they remained stoic about health issues and their condition remained unchanged, they would manage. It was easier to speak about symptoms that were not an indication of being old and that could be treated as something that could happen to anyone, anywhere, independent of chronological age. Health issues that were mentioned were either trivial (e.g., a pinched nerve, some joint pain, a tooth that needed treatment) or were related to a life threatening disease that had been cured and that was cited as an example of overcoming life's obstacles. Offspring and acquaintances tended to minimize existing and potential health issues for their elders as well.

Research literature that explicitly examined people's views and experiences of suffering and sickness depicted a similar reluctance in elderly people to view health conditions as the focal aspect of their being. Although it was difficult to ignore one's sickness and suffering when in the midst of living it — especially in front of an investigator who inquired directly and in detail

about one's health conditions — participants told stories that were more optimistic than pessimistic, more persistent and stoic than desperate and compromising. Participants were eager to express their lives as being more than their illnesses. In Van Maanen's (2006) study on health's and illness's attitudes among elderly people in the United States and England, his participants — even when suffering from aging and ill bodies — indicated that their well-being was not shaped solely by their health conditions. Like the participants in the present study, they considered aging to be not just a time of deterioration but also a time of growth; health was a state of mind as much as it was a state of the body. Through the narratives of elderly women, Grenier (2006) pointed out the distinction between the professional (i.e., medical, social work, nursing) understanding of age-related sickness and frailty and the actual experiences of the women living in that condition. Grenier's participants identified themselves as being frail but objected to the medical perception of them that recognized only their frailty and sickness. For these women, being sick was only part of their being. They had other dimensions of self that they esteemed, for example, meaning, triumph and achievement. Dacher (1998) examined narratives of elderly women who participated in a rehabilitation program due to various illnesses and showed how the whole was greater than its parts; in the midst of suffering, the vital part of oneself was striving to stay alive and make meaning out of a difficult existence. Black (2006) conducted a qualitative research project that explored elders' experiences of suffering. While soliciting stories of suffering brought out a general atmosphere of sadness and desolation, the act of telling a suffering story revealed layers of meanings that also elicited optimism and hope. Caplan, Haslett and Burleson (2005) asked elderly participants to write journals where they described loss in their later life. Loss was defined as the death of loved ones but, also, as the loss of physical strength and physical functions due to failing health. The authors found that stories

of suffering and loss were combined with stories of perseverance and hope. Waitzkin, Britt and Williams (1994) analyzed encounters between medical personal and elderly patients with health issues. They found that when conversations between the medical staff and their patients focused on various social and family aspects of the patients rather than just their medical conditions, the course of healing changed dramatically. When health status was not positioned as the main component in the person's life, it was dealt more efficiently and more successfully. Patients reacted better to the medical treatment and improved in a shorter time, thus confirming the assumption that health did not determine the entire picture.

Judging by the cited research that dealt with the ways in which suffering and sickness brought out the resilience and optimism in elderly participants, the refusal to dwell on these issues among the participants in the present study, seemed a sign of deliberate action and strength and not a sign of denial. Participants resisted applying upon themselves, their parent or acquaintance the vast amount of societal/cultural knowledge and stereotypes that consider old age as an inevitable time of deterioration. Although health and sickness were important in the discourse about old age in general, they did not play a prominent role when studying the elderly participants' views on aging. Moreover, the offspring and acquaintances in the present study were even less engaged in discussing health and sickness issues of their elders than the actors themselves.

A different approach ties these findings to psychodynamic mechanisms. We are protected by potent mechanisms of repression and denial that allow us to forget our mortal nature (Yalom, 1980; Kasket, 2006). Further, the realization that our existence is fragile and temporary does not interfere significantly with our daily lives. In the present study, these defense mechanism were expressed through minor complaints — a pinched nerve that slowed one down

at the tennis court or ski slopes that were too steep and should be avoided — but not a word was spoken about deterioration and decline in the looming future. However, the psychodynamic approach explained only part of the picture. Understanding old age as a distinct developmental stage suggests a different approach to overcoming existential anxieties. Elderly people may move to a stage where the drive to deny and avoid life unpredictable consequences is replaced with a positive drive to concentrate on the present.

Death and dying.

The main factor across all three groups in the participants' discourse on death was the wish to avoid a lingering, debilitating process of dying. The long process of dying has become an undesired reality of our times. Vincent (2003) reviewed cultural, societal and individual views on aging and the way in which the reconstruction of aging as a prelude to death influenced these perceptions. Modern society is unique in its strong association between old age and death. In earlier periods and in some countries, still, death has been associated with young children and pregnant women. Old age was associated with good fortune and wisdom. The development of medical technology promoted the perception of old age as an involuntarily prolonged and agonizing process. Along with technological advances in modern medicine flourished fantasies of discovering cures to aging that would allow immortality. Cicirelli (2002) found that people in the middle of their lives firmly expressed their objections to any life prolonging procedure, however, they became increasingly more ambivalent about their options as they advanced in years and adapted to changing health circumstances. In the present study, participants in all groups wished to avoid a lingering suffering death. However, only few expressed the intention of avoiding medical intervention, if that were the only way to prolong life

Kaufman (1999) presented two medical narratives of death to illustrate the clash between the cultural notions of “good death” (i.e., a quiet, controlled departure from life) and the more common reality of medical technologies that were able to prolong life but could not ensure quality of life. Kaufman analyzed a cultural assumption that, by the time death arrived, the people involved —medical staff, the families and the dying persons themselves — would know what to do. Her study showed that, while the medical staff were working hard to keep the aging body alive with the aid of intrusive technologies, families were not sure what they were supposed to do or whether they should decline a procedure that might change the coming end. A similar ambiguity was found in the present study. Most of the elderly participants expressed the wish to be among the lucky ones who would be spared a prolonged and painful dying stage. Their perceptions did not seem to resolve the gap between a general reality of lingering death in hospitals and a personal wish to die peacefully in one’s home. It seemed though that adopting a philosophy of life that was described in the present study as “living in the moment,” helped the elderly participants to avoid anxieties and fear around death issues. For many of them, the proximity of death in their lives (e.g., the death of close friends), motivated them to enjoy every hour and to concentrate on the triumph of being alive for yet another day. A similar view was presented by Gamliel (2004). She described the way elderly people in a nursing home discussed issues of death and dying. In a place where dying people were a constant reality, death was also a source of solidarity among residents. Waking up in the morning to find that the empty bed in the room was not yours, was a kind of triumph to share with the other survivors. Here again, while the literature about them was gloomy, the elderly found the approach that would make it bearable. The elderly participants in the present study used stories of older people who did well

and stories of good deaths to achieve a similar objective: they managed to distance death from themselves while concentrated on their present well-being.

In contrast to their elders, the offspring and acquaintances' groups, for the most part, avoided the topic all together. Although they were familiar with their parents' and acquaintances' fear of becoming dependent on others and suffering a lingering death, they gave the impression that they hoped (as suggested by Kaufman, 1999), that someone else would know what to do when comes the time to make difficult decisions.

The golden years.

The golden years' theme depicted the strong sense of joy and freedom that was central to the actors' narratives about their lives, as well as to the narratives of their offspring and acquaintances when talking about the actors' lives. Powerful statements that conveyed a high level of well-being and satisfaction with one's life stood in sharp contrast to negative social descriptions, attitudes and stereotypes about old age and old people in general (Hazan, 1994, 2000; Nuland, 2007; Vincent, 2003, 2006). These statements validated the results described in narrative and quantitative studies and told a much more optimistic story than might be expected, given the existing negative social and cultural connotations of aging. Interestingly enough, a neuropsychological approach yielded similar conclusions. A study by St. Jacques, Dolcos and Cabeza (2009) showed how elderly subjects (over 70 years old) tended to forget negative pictures shown to them, in comparison to younger subjects (up to 30 years old). The researchers also found that, when trying to retrieve negative pictures from memory, elderly participants used a different area of their brain than younger participants — one that was less associated with emotions of anxiety and fear. They concluded that differences in the way younger and older people processed strong negative emotions helped to preserve the well-being of elderly people.

Beside the importance of looking at well-being from different outlooks, applying these findings to the present study suggests that neurological constructs helped the elderly participants to feel good about themselves. And it may be that their positive attitudes helped, among other things, to influence their offspring's and acquaintances' perceptions on their well-being.

Old age in general.

One of the intriguing findings in the present study was the discrepancy between the participants' perceptions of their own, their parents' or acquaintances' old age and their perceptions about old age in general. For the most part, the actors' lives were perceived as being very good, in their own eyes and in the eyes of their offspring and acquaintances. However, for most of them, old age in general meant misery. Other old people suffered from the maladies of old age; the actors, in their own eyes and in the eyes of their offspring and acquaintances, were untouched by them. While most of the elderly participants expressed joy, satisfaction and pride in their current stage of life, their views on old age in general were disapproving. These views ranged from negative stereotypes and repellent emotions towards old age to social reforms needed in order to help the poor and disadvantaged elderly. As was mentioned earlier, a similar discrepancy was found when looking at the theoretical literature on aging as opposed to research done that described old age from the stand point of its members. While social theories emphasized the negative biases and stereotypes of old age, people in the process of living their old age were much more positive when describing their personal experiences. More than that, the research literature that observed, measured and compared old age characteristics reported a diverse picture that had positive as well as negative aspects. In the present study, old age in general or the old age of others were the target for most of participants' antagonism and animosity on the subject. In support of these findings, Heckhausen and Krueger (1993)

suggested that the distance between one's own age perceptions and his or her perceptions of others was more typical for older people than for younger ones. They examined different age groups from 21 years of age to 80 years of age on the way they evaluated expectations of self-development in comparison to their perceptions of other people's development. The researchers found that the participants in the old group (60-80 years old), tended to evaluate their own developmental achievements more highly than the achievements they attributed to the other members of their age group.

One way to explain these findings is through the psychoanalytical approach that proposes a direct line between death anxiety and attitudes towards old age (Bond, 2006; Silver, 1992; Vincent, 2003, 2006). In this approach, fear of death is transformed into emotions of repulsion, disgust and, at times, hatred towards old age. As we can't always contain these emotions in an abstract form, we tend to project at least some of them onto old people.

Gamliel (2000, 2005) stressed the potency of using the other as the projected target for one's fears and anxieties. As long as the devastating consequences of old age could be ascribed to others — those who were really old, really sick, really poorly endowed genetically, really unfit — none of those consequences could be inflicted upon us. Another benefit to this projection was a logical inference: The further away one was from that kind of old age, the further away one was from death.

Everyday activities.

Participants' descriptions of the ways in which the actors experienced their day-to-day activities identified a powerful tool that contributed to feelings of satisfaction and joy in their lives and minimized the influence of negative views of old age on their sense of well-being. Concentrating on the everyday comings and goings, established a sense of accomplishment and

enjoyment but also created a feeling of continuity. The question, used in the present study, “What does a typical day look like for you?” has been referenced in other research on elderly lives (Kaufman, 1986; Rohovit, 2000). It was usually used as an ice breaker, a way to enter into the participant’s life in a casual manner that did not require planned, carefully crafted answers. As the researchers reported, he or she would then move on to the more essential and profound issues on the research agenda. Rohovit (2000) even decided to skip this question, once she realized that her participants spoke willingly and enthusiastically and that there was no need to ease them into the conversation. However, in the present study, the description of everyday affairs, not only, provided an opportunity to see the concrete details of the elderly participants’ lives but also led to significant insights, when trying to balance abstract meanings and their practical manifestations.

Other researchers have explored the premise that focusing on the present might yield a sense of calmness and satisfaction in relation to old age. As in the present study, they concluded that the routine, fixed way in which elderly people arranged and experienced their everyday activities explained some of their satisfaction in life. Lieblich (2008) discussed how a group of elderly people, who met almost every morning, used their rituals and routines to push away the anxieties of old age and the passing of time. They created a place for themselves where time stopped or, at least, moved very slowly.

Gamliel (2000, 2005) and Hazan (2000) also identified focusing on the present, denying the passage of time and clinging to a familiar and repetitive schedule as key defenses for elderly people’s “end of the road” anxieties. Their data was collected in nursing homes — places that were prone to evoke these same anxieties and where the residents had limited means of organizing spaces for themselves that were protected from the future. In one of the day centers,

for example, residents would not talk about the past or even their lives outside the center, nor would they discuss members who were not coming anymore. What happened outside of the center was, many times, filled with loneliness, diseases and deterioration. They preferred to use the day center as an island that was disconnected from all that could or did go wrong in the outside world.

Eyal (1996) provided a relevant framework that looked at the different experiences and perceptions people related to the passing of time. She found that elderly people experienced a deep discrepancy between past time and present time, between personal time and social time and more commonly, between physical time and emotional time. One of the most powerful defenses against these discrepancies, especially the passing of time and the unavoidable consequences of getting closer to death, was to put oneself above it. If one focused on the present, the here and now, then the unpredictable future would become distant. Leading a life with few changes, a life that moved in a cycle, helped in focusing on the present. Everyday comings and goings were not meant to achieve a future nor glorify a past; next week was not the promise of adventure but, rather, the promise of stability and continuation. Time, in this experience, acquired cyclical qualities. Each passing day and week became a closed system that ran almost like a *perpetuum mobile*, generating strength and satisfaction from the continuous movement. The constant, repeating everyday events left one with the impression that it was never ending. This reassurance weakened feelings of annihilation and despair.

It seemed that the theme of everyday activities, in the present study, captured the forcefulness suggested in Eyal's (1996) framework. The enthusiasm and delight in which the elderly participants described their everyday activities and repeated routines and the amazement and knowledge of details their offspring and acquaintances showed when talking about these

topics, gained some of its strength from the additive comfort and ease that was brought by experiencing the passing time in a less threatened way.

Many elderly participants, in the present study, were involved in creative activities at different levels of intensity. Fisher and Specht (1999) stated: “Creative activity can help the individual transcend the negative aspects of life by focusing on the positive and fostering the optimization versus the minimization” (p. 466). Fisher and Specht measured creativity as a personality construct that promoted successful aging. They concluded that creativity contributed to successful aging by fostering a sense of purpose, interaction with others, personal growth, self-acceptance, autonomy and health. Rugh (1991) suggested that: “The arts, when properly engaged, are no mere time-fillers but a vehicle for complex cognitive and emotional expression and development” (p. 29). In the present study, the arts, whether practiced hands-on or experienced as audience, were significant to both the actors’ sense of completion and to their offspring’s and acquaintances’ sense of the actors’ well-being. The elderly participants seemed to have found a satisfactory way by which to balance the acts of everyday living and the activities that nourished their inner selves. In doing so, they strengthen their sense of completion and peace.

Family ties.

There is a societal convention, demonstrated in literature, theater, movies, reportages and interviews with seniors: elderly people will present their children and grandchildren as the most important part of their lives, whenever they can. Once the outer world became less accessible and elder persons were not actively involved in working and having a career, family was what lasted. Relationships with children and grandchildren continued until the very last moment of a person’s life (Nuland, 2007, Vincent, 2003). Indeed, the elderly participants in the present study

described their children and grandchildren as a satisfying source of meaning in their lives. Children and grandchildren were a source of joy and pride and stories about them were told in a straight forward, even toned manner. However, many times, the stories seemed to depict the relationships in a hollow manner, sticking to trivial facts in a way that suggested that there was not much involvement in the relationship. More than that, although children and grandchildren were often mentioned as an important element in the elder's life, their actual presence in their everyday doings was small, emphasizing a discrepancy between the scripted story and its manifestation in everyday life. Spector-Mersel (2008) supported this observation. In her study, narratives about one's family were absent from participants' spontaneous stories about their own lives. However, when asked directly, her participants agreed that their children, grandchildren and significant others were the most important part of their lives.

Koropecy-Cox (2002), from a quantitative paradigm, examined the importance of parenthood as a potential source of instrumental and emotional support in old age. Using data from a comprehensive survey on families, Koropecy-Cox concluded that parental well-being was sometimes severely damaged because of poor relationships with offspring. Also, feelings of dependency on ones' children could negatively affect their sense of well-being. Childless adults were more influenced by society's negative views on people who did not have children than they were affected by the absence of children in their lives.

When looking at the actors' family ties from their offspring's perspective, some clear distinctions were evident. Offspring understood and described their relationships with their parents at different levels of complexity. For the offspring, relationships with their parents revealed more twists and turns. Many times, offspring talked about the past, reliving old conflicts and clinging to past conflicts. They seemed to be forever looking for approval and

seemed unable to acknowledge the different stage in life their parents had reached. The discrepancy between perceptions of old age in general and those of one's parent was stronger when examining the unchanged place of parents in their offspring perceptions. From the offspring's perspective, offspring-parent relationships were, at times, as active, dynamic, disturbing and consuming as they might have been twenty, thirty and fifty years ago.

Apparently, the place a parent holds in his or her child's mind — an image that was established and expanded through endless interactions — is not easily replaced by the image of an aging, feeble, sometimes confused and burdened parent. As revealed through their narratives, offspring perceptions of their parents as potent adults were almost always uninfluenced by their parents' aging.

Self and identity.

The not-old self and the seasoned self.

The not-old self and the seasoned self were powerful constructs that appeared in many of the narratives in the present study. These constructs also demonstrated the dilemma depicted in previous sections: how, if at all, can one reconcile the societal knowledge of old age with the personal experience of it? At different levels of intensity, participants in the present study, combined self-perceptions of one's younger images with their perceptions of other old people to reconstruct a comfortable image of aging. In the actors' narratives, their notions of themselves and of other older people reflected an understanding and acceptance of their own experiences and perceptions of aging, in comparison to others. The offspring and the acquaintances detached themselves, for the most part, from conventional old age imagery of their elderly parents or acquaintances and resolved the dilemma by stating that the elder actor was simply "not old," or "not yet old," or "not old enough to be labeled as old." The details of the seasoned self provided

all groups of participants with a solid image of old age — a cluster of traits, deeds and acknowledgments that separated themselves and their own from the suffering of old age.

Other researchers observed this phenomenon as well. Thompson (1993) stated:

The fundamental message which we have learnt from our informants is in our title (*'I don't feel old': The significance of the search for meaning in later life*). Unless they are physically ill or depressed, they do not feel in their real selves, that they are old. And given the common stereotypes of old age, they are absolutely right. (p. 686)

Andrews (1999) and Witkin (1999) pointed out the impossible gap we, as individuals and as a society, negotiate when trying to reconcile the tension between aging bodies and the ageless spirits that reside within these bodies. In an environment that perceived old age as, inevitably, a time of disease, decline, deterioration, senility and dementia, it came as no surprise that elderly people claimed not to feel old. Nygren et al (2005) measured, in a group of elderly participants of eighty five years and older, inner strength defined by traits like resilience, sense of coherence, purpose in life and sense of transcendence. They found a strong sense of inner strength that was not influenced by age. More than that, they found that perceived physical and mental health status were not issues that changed participants' performance on the traits measured. Even when participants were battling with various diseases and fading health, their difficult circumstances did not change their inner self perception. Keith (1977) showed that negative stereotypes of old age (1) were only weakly associated with self-definition as old and (2) were less important than life changes in determining age identification

Pinquart (2002) investigated the effects of negative old age stereotypes on elderly people and found that elderly participants rated their own lives in a much more positive way than they rated the lives of similar elderly people. His results suggested that the elderly participants could

deny negative images attributed to their age group by attributing the negative stereotypes to other members of their age group but not to themselves.

Gamliel (2000, 20005) discussed the concept that comparing oneself to others strengthens the self's perceived agency. Gamliel collected her data in nursing homes and, although nursing homes were identified by their residents as "the end of the road," people could still find ways to suppress their anxieties by comparing themselves to those who were in a worse physical and mental shape. Conversely, referencing examples of older people who were doing well helped suppress their anxieties raised by an uncertain future. Most of the participants in the present study, whether referring to themselves or to their elderly parent or acquaintance used the not-old self and the seasoned self constructs to strengthen their overall satisfaction from their stage in life and place in society .

The sad self.

The attribution of depression and sadness to elderly people is one of the presumptions that arise from perceiving old age as a time of decline and deterioration. Who would not be depressed when experiencing his or her own aging? Consequently, studies were generated to explore emotional status of elderly people (Nuland, 2007). The differences between the cultural understating of old age and the experiences of the people living it were apparent in the present study. The elderly participants, their offspring and acquaintances did not perceive major mood deficiencies in themselves or in their parent or acquaintance. The only mentions of sadness and depression were made by a few of the offspring and they, clearly, attributed their elders' sadness to personality characteristics and life circumstances that were not connected to growing old but where present through their entire lives.

Beliefs and values.

Living in the moment and being interested in society's issues were important for the elderly participants. These values made a practical contribution to the discussion of the tools elderly participants used to block possible anxieties related to old age. Living in the moment was practiced as a valued way of life that would ensure purposeful being but would also ease anxieties related to an uncertain future. Living in the moment provided the rationale for concentrating on the present and supported the concentration on everyday activities. In a similar manner, concentrating on society's challenges and achievements removed the focus from personal aging.

Practicing religion.

A cultural convention connects elderhood and spirituality, implying that to approach the end of life brings one closer to God. Indeed, spirituality and religion are an important part of research with elderly populations. Sadler and Biggs (2006) reviewed the literature on spirituality and religion and their influence on successful aging. They found that concepts of spirituality (e.g., self-searching, developing perspective, focusing on the outer circle of society's needs) were appreciated by the elderly population; however, participation in formal religious activities did not necessarily predict successful aging. In the present study, the spiritual needs of elderly participants seemed to give precedence to a system of values closer to Eastern philosophies than to the monotheistic religions. However, for some of the women, spirituality and participation in active religious lives were presented as complimentary to each other and as such, created a meaningful source of emotional strength.

The future.

Perhaps one of the unique qualities of old age as a developmental stage is that in old age, no one wishes to develop anymore. If development can't take place without some sort of change, then old people don't wish to develop anymore because they don't wish to change. Participants in the present study defined change as slowing down; slowing down meant more time needed to accomplish every day activities and, sometimes, not being able to accomplish them at all. When vision deteriorated, going out to buy milk became unsafe and reading the newspaper, impossible. Participants were ready to acknowledge some slowing down as a possible scenario for the future but they also expressed a strongly held hope: that things would not change too much for them and that life could go on almost in the same manner as it did at present. Here again, the medical and societal information about grim scenarios of old age were not expressed in most of the participants' narratives and did not affect their plans (nor the plans of their offspring and acquaintances) for a life lived to its utmost possibilities.

Offspring, as well as their elderly parents, hoped that the parents' affairs would remain more or less unchanged as time went by. Offspring were even more reluctant to discuss the future aging of their parents or, at least, they were more reluctant to share their family private discourse on the matter. If change for their elders was inevitable, offspring hoped the change would be a gradual slowing down rather than a dramatic shift in health. Slowing down was still change but it was a gradual and expected change and, therefore, less threatening.

Another interesting finding in the present study was that most participants in the three groups did not talk about death when thinking about the future, whether it was their future or the future of their elderly participant in their triad. Although the elderly participants had strong views about what kind of death they wanted for themselves, they did not include death scenarios

in their future projections. Cicirelli (2002) conducted comprehensive research on older adults' views on death, using qualitative and quantitative data. He reported a similar discrepancy between participants' notions of a good death and their unwillingness to address their own death or process of dying. Whether they held the pragmatic view that, as there was nothing to do about it, there was nothing to talk about or were driven by denial and suppression, participants in the present study gave the impression that the future was safe to contemplate as long as (1) it did not contain death and dying and (2) it did not entail visions of dependency and fading.

A Different Stage

Whether called the process of disengagement, gerotranscendence, elderhood, or ego integrity, the elderly participants in the present study expressed a sense of satisfaction and well-being in their lives. They were not particularly bothered by the future; they enjoyed their everyday lives and had a keen interest in their families, their communities and the world around them. Their narratives supported the theories, cited in earlier sections, that position old age as a different developmental stage, characterized by transcendent sentiments, introspection, sense of accomplishment and joy and a qualitatively different path of being. When looking at the findings from Thomas' (2004) view, old age was, for these elders, a life stage where Being was favored over Doing. Many of the actors were still engaged in the Doing aspects of their lives, especially among the male group. However, they had found the right balance between Being and Doing modes of experiencing life; a balance that allowed them to enjoy the Being aspects of their lives while still engaging in Doing. For them, growing old was a different and distinct stage of life even when they portrayed themselves as busy, active and leading a "business as usual" kind of life. Their everyday descriptions reflected the priority given to introspection, living in the moment, leaving the adult goal-seeking culture behind and enjoying a deeper

experience of the present time. That is not to say that the aspects of adult personality and life style were not important anymore. The actors talked about projects that they were involved in, activities that filled every moment in their days and a sense of health and youth that contradicted their aging bodies. They enjoyed their elderhood but did not forsake their adulthood self-perceptions, managing to hold on to both sides and not to be bothered by inner inconsistencies. Death seemed to lose its potent influence. More than it was denied, it supported the acceptance of a relaxed, slowed down present. After all, there was nothing to hurry towards.

Three Voices, One Story

The use of three voices in the present study to tell a single story was a unique approach. The assumption was that the voices of the offspring and the acquaintances would be different from the voices of the actors, primarily, in that their voices would reflect the societal images of old age as applied to their elderly parent or acquaintance. The offspring were in the unique position of having memories of their parent as a young person and simultaneously, bearing witness to that parent's aging process. It was assumed that their unique position would drive them to compare and reflect on the effect the passing time had on their parents. As it happened, offspring told the most diverse stories about their elders, adding the history of the family relationships to their narratives. Their stories helped to construct a deeper understanding of their parents as unique individuals and not just their aging process. The role of offspring was stronger than the impact of aging; the emotional color of the offspring's narratives was determined more by familial dynamics than by the present state of their elderly parents. In that sense, offspring's narratives captured much more the individual images of the elderly participants and not the expected societal images of old age.

The voice of the acquaintances was assumed to represent, at least partly, the stereotypical voice of society regarding the miseries of old age. The acquaintances knew the elderly participants only in their later years, as old people. They could not compare the actors' present state to the past and were not involved in complicated relationships with them. Their perspectives were driven by the present, a present that, hypothetically, would invoke some negative societal images of old age. However, the opposite happened. Instead of invoking negative stereotypes acquaintances, for the most part, held favorable attitudes, opinions and interpretations regarding the lives of the elder actors in their triads. They marveled at their elders' great health, great old age and great lives; they were familiar with the details of the actors' everyday lives and wished the same kind of old age for themselves. The majority of acquaintances made no judgmental or negative observation regarding their actors' mood, alertness and general state. They could not imagine their elderly acquaintance as vulnerable and deteriorating.

Conversely, if the elderly participants could choose, they would choose to always be seen through the eyes of their acquaintances. Purposely or accidentally, each actor had chosen the people who would represent him or her in the best possible way — sometimes presenting an even more idealized image of the actors than the actors did themselves. In subtle ways, it seemed that the actors were driven by the wish to convey their “no complaint” position, defending their current life stage as being as productive, rich and happy, as if they were still fully in their adult roles. They did this through their optimistic portrait of their lives, their caution when discussing controversial issues and their reluctance to raise problematic, hurtful subjects. They also did this by referring to other participants, those whom they saw as doing even better than themselves, as good candidates for the study who could also portrait a good old age. They

also did this by choosing acquaintances who would give solid, positive accounts of their lives. In doing so, the elder participants strengthened the triad uniformity, encouraging the consistent presentation of a good story with a happy ending. The offspring and the acquaintances narrated individual, personalized stories that were almost always free from the aversive implications of old age in general. They enhanced the unifying structure of the triad, letting their voices function, for the most part, as support beams to the main story.

Gender Differences

In order to enrich the narratives, a gender-balanced group of participants was selected for the present study. No initial assumptions were made as to the differences between men and women, however, some differences were apparent. Although the same methods were used to recruit all participants regardless of gender, there were gender differences in marital and economic status. The majority of male actors were slightly better off economically than the women and most of them were living with their wives, whereas the majority of women were single.

If participants would have been selected only according to a “first come, first interviewed” scenario, there would have been a majority of women. Women were more interested in the research topic and seemed keener to explore their ideas and stories. For the most part, the women’s narratives showed greater complexity and allowed more doubts to be expressed. Women talked more freely about losing their physical beauty than men. Women described their families of origin with more details and emotional complexities than did the men. As reflected in both actor and offspring narratives, women’s relationships with their offspring were also described in a richer, more multifaceted manner. Women tended to lean less on their past careers, even when those careers were impressive ones. Men, for the most part, were not

only involved in their past careers but were more determined to establish a career-like structure for their present. Gender differences seem important for further research, not only to establish the findings of the present study but to understand the way these differences are experienced by the actors. In accordance with the present study it would be informed to listen to the ways elderly women and elderly men understand their different and similar positions in the aging process.

Another gender difference had to do with the importance of one's home. While most women preferred to conduct the interviews in their homes, most men preferred a work-oriented or a public space. Shenk, Kuwahara, and Zablotsky (2004) explored the way women's homes and possessions played a role in their identities once their partners died and children left home. The authors showed how, in various ways, living in the same house through most of one's life added a level of familiarity, comfort and wonder in old age. The authors suggested future research to explore the place of "home" among women who developed a career outside of their houses. In some ways, the eight women in the present study could fit their criterion for future explorations. They all were of the same cohort as the female participants in the Shenk, et al study but differed in two aspects: (1) seven out of the eight had worked outside their home for most of their adult life, and (2) did not still live in the same houses they had shared with their partners and where they had raised their children. They moved to residential locations and chose homes that fitted their sense of independence, singlehood and changing needs. Although some of the women in the present study acquired their current apartments relatively recently, their homes still reflected a genuine part of themselves, a part they felt comfortable and proud of. A strong reflection of their attachment to their homes was their immediate and spontaneous invitation to conduct the interviews there. It might be that sharing the house with a partner

changed the dynamics; a home invitation would have needed to be arranged with the partner, as well as with the participant. But meeting “outside of the house” also meant an appointment, a meeting to write down, a reason to get dressed and to go out. This aspect seemed to appeal to the men much more than to the women.

Silver (2003) claimed that, with old age, the differences between men and women tended to blur. In addition to changes in traditional adult roles, there was also a change in traditional gender roles; as old age became more prominent, the differences between these roles became less distinct. Stauffer (2007) explored the development of older women who were able to free themselves from traditional gender roles and move to a stage where their [a]gendered wisdom was their main driving force. It seemed that the women in the present study adapted what might be considered masculine attributes, especially for their generation: They were independent, they managed their own money and they were responsible for their own decisions. Most of all, they experienced a deep sense of freedom in being able to express themselves, liberated from society’s demands.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The elderly participants in the present study were upper middle class individuals, retired from various professional fields, living independently in their homes and enjoying, for the most part, good health. Conducted in NYC, most of the participants were Jewish. Middle class, economically independent and relatively healthy participants were used to study issues of aging by other researchers. Ward-Baker (2005) referred to her ideal participants as “the remarkable oldest old,” looking for people above 85 years old who lived independently in their homes and who were productive in various areas of their lives. Kroger (2002) set a sampling criterion in which all her participants or their partners had held professional or managerial positions when

they belonged to the active work force. The main reason to choose middle class, relatively settled participants, to study narratives of old age in the present study, was to look at a comfort old age, believing that poverty and illness would mask the experience of natural aging. The elderly participants chosen for the present study were fluent, elaborative and had the time and leisure to speak about their lives. They were also easier to reach through the recruitment lanes that were available to the present study. Similar reasons were given by the researchers mentioned above, who thought to look at old age that was not inflicted by survival struggles. Ward-baker (2005) wanted productive, involved and contributing people to learn the secret of their success in old age. Kroger (2002) looked for participants who worked steadily in professional positions through their adult life. As old age is a relatively new area of research in psychology, it seems that middle-class old age served the same role as previous generation of subjects who were young, white and male, (i.e., participants that were supposed to establish the first data base on any behavioral inquiry). Meanings of old age in the present study referred to meanings attributed to old age by a group of middle class, white, people, rooted in the American culture and living, for the most part, in urban neighborhoods. That was true for actors, offspring and acquaintances alike. The next stage for the present study should be looking at meanings of old age among participants from different ranks of society. It would be especially important to contest the idea of old age as a different developmental stage with participants who might still be struggling to fulfill basic needs. Their voices could provide a more poignant and diverse picture. The process of gerotranscendence might look and feel very different from their perspective.

Also, the present study showed some gender differences that might have been amplified by other conditions. (e.g., marital status). It would be interesting to deepen the narrative data on

gender differences in aging, using participants that present richer diversity in life styles and life circumstances.

Recent studies have urged to remove old age from public discussion altogether, arguing that old age was a social construct that strengthened ageism tendencies. However this approach does not benefit the elderly population. In preferring agelessness theories, we deny old people the position they deserve in society, in their homes and in their own self-perceptions. (Andrews, 1999; Neugarten, 1996). According to Thomas (2004), the challenge for our society, at this time, is to strip old age of its excessive negativism and to reposition it as a time of life with possibilities and challenges, that require changes and adaptation; a time that is different but very familiar and that holds profound benefits for individuals and society alike. The “baby boomers” are approaching elderhood — changing gears, looking at options and retiring early (Thomas, 2004, Baltes, Lindengerer and Staudinger, 1998). As the past few decades have shown, once the baby boomers reached a given life stage, they brought with them an army of experts and an endless number of talk shows. As they become elders, the baby boomer generation may reclaim the uniqueness of aging.

Some of the confusion about old age and old people arrives from attempts to integrate findings that emerge from different research approaches. Trying to explore and combine different sets of findings without pointing out their different positions clouds the results and confounds the conclusions. Three main research orientations can be established: 1) research that elicited life narratives of elderly people and depicted the optimism, courage, humor and thrust for life they observed in their participants, 2) research that focused on societal attitudes and policies and observed the negative sides of perceived old age including ethnographies based in nursing homes that reported the devastating impact of the institution and 3) research that looked at

different components of human behavior using a life span perspective. The three approaches yielded different outlooks on old age and were responsible for research data that at times seem to blend, overlap and contradict itself. However, putting the different research perspectives side by side explains some of the discrepancies, validates important findings and reinforces the idea of elderhood as a separate stage in life. The anxiety surrounding old age is inevitable and almost universal. However, old age, from the stand point of people living in the midst of it, is a distinctive stage in life. A stage in life that encompasses elements of growth and achievement, that overshadow the general negative images. It would be important to continue exploring how the different research approaches can be used to reconcile and strengthen each other.

From the standpoint of the present study, it would be informative to go back to the three groups of participants and ask them how they understand the discrepancy in their own narratives of old age in general, their own old age and the old age of their parent or acquaintance. Their answers may inform us about the creative ways by which people negotiate the different perspectives. More than that, it might be that realizing the discrepancies between the personal and the public will change participants' views and will promote the positive atmosphere for aging and growing old.

Wrapping Up

I started this study hoping to get a better understanding of old age, as it is experienced by people who are in the midst of living it and as it is perceived by their family members and acquaintances. One of the more important understandings that came out of this study was how flat the image of an “old person” was, how strong, rooted and entangled were people’s fears and anxieties surrounding old age — but also, how easily these preconceptions could be put down when dealing with a real person. More than that, the elderly participants did not live in fear.

Their own aging did not scare them. They were not living in a permanent state of panic nor were they sitting all day in a corner engulfed by worries about the future. Even more so, their offspring and acquaintances did not perceive fear and panic in their elder triad members. Although some anxieties could not be avoided, they existed on a moderate, realistic scale; fear did not paralyze these elders from just living.

Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Call for participants

If you are 80 years or older, and interested in participating in research that explores meanings in life, please join us for a journey of revelations.

I am a doctoral student at the developmental psychology department of the graduate Center, CUNY, and for more details please call me:

Rivka Tenenbaum-Precel at: [REDACTED]

Or: [REDACTED]

Or e-mail: [REDACTED]

The study requires an interview that will last sixty minutes at your preferred location and your preferred date and time.

Also,

I will ask you to refer to me two other people in your life for similar interviews; a son or daughter and a person, younger than yourself, with whom you have been acquainted for no more than the last five years.

Hope to hear from you soon,

Rivka Tenenbaum-Precel

Appendix B: Demographic Distribution of Participants

Table B1: Actors' Demographic Distribution (N=16).

| Name | Gender^a | Age^b | Marital/Family status | Education |
|-------------|---------------------------|------------------------|--|------------------|
| Hanna | F | 86 | Widow; children, grandchildren | M.A. |
| Pearl | F | 78 | Widow; children, grandchildren | M.A. |
| Lidia | F | 89 | Single | M.A. |
| Marge | F | 78 | Divorced; children, grandchildren | B.A. |
| Mary | F | 79 | Widow; children, | M.A. |
| Misha | F | 81 | Widow; children, grandchildren | B.A. |
| David | M | 92 | Widow; children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren | B.A. |
| Sherry | F | 87 | Widow; children, grandchildren | B.A. |
| Hersh | M | 80 | Widow; children, grandchildren | B.A. |
| Jonah | M | 84 | Widow; children | some college |
| Maria | F | 88 | Widow; children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren | some college |
| Simon | M | 93 | Widow; children, grandchildren | B.A. |
| Abraham | M | 85 | Widow; children, grandchildren | B.A. |
| Jayson | M | 80 | Widow; children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren | B.A. |
| Bernard | M | 81 | Married | Ph.D. |
| Arthur | M | 84 | Married; children; grandchildren | Ph.D. |

^a F = Female; M= Male

^b Age at time of interview

Appendix B, continued: Demographic Distribution

Table B2: Offspring's Demographic Distribution (N=15).

| Name | Gender^a | Age^b | Marital/Family status | Education |
|--------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------|
| Hanna's son | M | 53 | Married; children | Ph.D. |
| Pearl's daughter | F | 46 | Single | B.A. |
| Lidia's relative | F | 51 | Married | B.A. |
| Marge's daughter | F | 48 | Married; children. | B.A. |
| Mary's daughter | F | 51 | Single | B.A. |
| Misha's daughter | F | 56 | Single | B.A. |
| David's son | M | 56 | Married; children. | Ph.D. |
| Sherry's son | M | 62 | Married; children, grandchildren | B.A. |
| Hersh's daughter | F | 57 | Divorced | B.A. |
| Jonah's daughter | F | 59 | Single | B.A. |
| Maria's daughter | F | 61 | Divorced; children | M.A. |
| Abraham's daughter | F | 55 | Married; children | M.A. |
| Jayson's son | M | 44 | Married; children | M.A. |
| Bernard's relative | F | 59 | Married | B.A. |
| Arthur's daughter | F | 45 | Single | B.A. |

^a F= female, M= male

^b Age at time of interview

Appendix B, continued: Demographic Distribution**Table B3: Acquaintances' Demographic Distribution (N=14).**

| Name | Gender^a | Age^b | Marital/Family status | Education |
|------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------|
| Hanna's acquaintance | F | 34 | Married; children | M.A. |
| Pearl's acquaintance | F | 64 | Single | M.A. |
| Lidia's acquaintance | F | 81 | Widow; children | PhD |
| Marge's acquaintance | M | 68 | Married; children | M.A. |
| Mary's acquaintance | F | 56 | Married | M.A. |
| Misha's acquaintance | F | 51 | Single | some college |
| David's acquaintance | M | 86 | Married; children | high school |
| Sherry's acquaintance | F | 38 | Married; children | some college |
| Hersh's acquaintance | F | 36 | Married; children | some college |
| Jonah's acquaintance | M | 42 | Married; children | M.A. |
| Maria's acquaintance | F | 57 | Married; children, grandchildren | M.A. |
| Abraham's acquaintance | M | 79 | Married; children | B.A. |
| Jayson's acquaintance | M | 46 | Single | Ph.D. |
| Arthur's acquaintance | M | 67 | Married; children | B.A. |

^a F = female, M = male

^b Age at time of interview

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

C1: Interview Protocol for Actors.

- How is life for you these days?
- How does a typical day look like? What are your daily, weekly, routines?
- How do you see yourself in five years from now?

- What do you think about old age in general?
- How do you feel about old age in general?

Appendix C, continued: Interview Protocols

C2: Interview Protocol for Offspring and Acquaintances

- In your opinion, how is life for _____ these days?
- As far as you know, what does a typical day look like for _____? What are his or her daily, weekly, routines?
- How do you see _____'s life in five years from now?
- How do you imagine yourself to be when you reach _____'s age?
- Do you think you could aid _____if necessary in his or her physical needs?

- What do you think about old age in general?
- How do you feel about old age in general?

Appendix C, continued: Interview Protocols**C3: Demographic Questionnaire**

Please take a moment to fill in the demographic information we request for our study. Do not write your name or any other identifying details. The information will be used for analysis purposes.

1) Year and place of birth:_____.

2) Family status: _____.

3) Education:_____

4) Occupation:_____

Appendix D: Themes**1. First attempt— Reflection on self, on parent, on acquaintance at present****2. Conditions of aging**

2.1 Health and sickness

2.2 Death and dying

2.3 The golden years

2.4 Old age in general

3. So, what do you do? Everyday activities**4. Family ties**

4.1 Family of choice

4.2 Family of origin

5. Who we are — self and identity

5.1 The not old self

5.2 The seasoned self

5.3 The single self

5.4 The way I look

5.5 The not old parent

5.6 The sad self

6. Beliefs and values

6.1 Living in the moment

6.2 For the greater good

7. And what next? The future

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