The aging experiences of English speaking older white women in central South Africa

By

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CHAPTER 1

1 Introducing the dissertation and the research question

The concept of age has changed in the last decade. Life expectancy has increased (Sanderson & Scherbov 2008:3) and people's concepts of aging have changed. While old age and aging are considered natural human experiences, the concept of growing old mostly carries with it negative connotations and demeaning stereotypes within Western society, where youth is favoured and valued (Rozario & Derienzis 2009:540). This often implies that being old, or growing older is negative, and that older people are victims who are doomed to live out their last days in undesirable circumstances.

Changes in gender roles as well as the relationships and challenges in later life have emerged as areas of study in the fields of gender and aging. There have been significant advances in the understanding of the lives of older people and particularly older women during recent years, where much of the focus is on the transition to retirement, widowhood, and the onset of deteriorating health issues (Arber et al. 2003:1). This study contributes to this growing research field at the intersection of aging and gender by focusing on the aging experience of English speaking older women in central South Africa.

Upon retirement or being widowed, older persons often experience role losses, where they need to reassess their lives in order to assume a new identity without the former predictable roles that are used to guide behavior. For some older persons living on a fixed income, making ends meet or just paying for basic necessities often pose a challenge. For others, living with various health conditions that affect daily functioning, the realities of growing older may appear to be overwhelming.

Greer (1991:41) notes that a woman's passage through late midlife signals *"an indication for [a] woman that the period of her vigor is beginning to disappear forever"*. Although later life is often portrayed as a time of loss and challenge (Schmall & Bowman 2004:2), Arber et al. (2003:2) state that widowhood could mean a new found sense of freedom and autonomy for older women. According to Breheny and Stevens (2010:41), research done on the aging population has indicated that recent social policy has been promoting later life as a period of opportunity; activity; enjoyment; connection with family and friends; and contribution to community, which challenges previous negative connotations associated with the aging experience. Studies often show that older persons are generally satisfied with their lives despite the challenges and losses they may experience.

Age represents an indicator for several distinctive processes within the aging journey. The term aging could refer to the chronological change in age from year to year, thereby defining membership of a particular cohort or generation. It can also be used to describe the progressive physical decline in the physiological aging process (Arber et al. 2003:3), the change in family and social roles (Harwood 2007:12), as well as the increase in opportunities for aging people to experience life constructively.

In previous decades, researchers mainly focused on the earlier years of life – childhood, youth and early adulthood. While psychologists focused on stage models of growth and development, sociologists often formulated theories of socialization and how the youth become part of society (Gubrium & Holstein 2000a:2). Gubrium and Holstein (2000b:2) state that it was only with the noticeable aging of the population during the latter part of the twentieth century that life course research was extended to include the phenomenon of an aging population.

As women age, they sometimes question how they may become more truly themselves, or how they might approach aging with expectations of enhancing their quality of life. Listening to the lived experiences of older women hopefully illustrates how they reflect on these issues. Listening to these older women describe the meaning of their life-world, while struggling with the loss of a partner, or the fear of becoming increasingly dependent on others because of their declining health may help others understand this stage of the life journey.

1.1   Why study aging?

"Studying aging is rather like examining a moving target. As people grow older, society itself changes, as does the very meaning of being old" (Giddens & Sutton 2013:356). The increasing aging population has created a growing interest in developing a greater understanding of aging. According to Coleman, Bond & Peace (1993:9), longevity should be enjoyed, rather than feared. They point out that society has a *"problem-orientated approach to aging"* and that understanding the basis of attitudes towards aging could serve to gain *"greater awareness"* about the future, if not a greater sense of optimism (Coleman et al. 1993:10).

Hildebrand (1995:2) refers to the increased aging population and the increased longevity as reasons to increase knowledge and awareness about the aging process. He argues that a greater understanding is needed about the social and psychological variables involved in aging since it involves *"enjoying and living through a period for which there are no precedents"* (Hildebrand 1995:5). Older people, especially older women are more often than not, perceived and treated as being more dependent than they are or need to be.

Gilleard and Higgs, as cited in Ballard, Elston and Gabe (2005:170) state that the meaning of aging is no longer fixed. They argue that: *"(w)e are beginning to see a variety of cultures of aging where the meaning of aging relates to the identity that individuals construct to express*

and interpret their own aging […] providing a new cultural space for the expression of individualized versions of aging identity." Turner (1970:15), however, points out that: *"we inevitably grow up, grow older, and die; thus no one can argue that aging is wholly a social construction."*

The meaning of aging for women today is often seen as being different than for those women approaching their final decade twenty to twenty five years ago. Women born prior to World War II were women whose lives traditionally focused on the role of being wife, mother, and fulfilling various social obligations. While the women in rural communities often worked with their husbands as partners in farming families, combining childrearing and house making, women in urban families often relied on the single wage of the husband and father of the family – who was mostly working outside the home. Although many women worked before getting married, most middle-class white women had few other opportunities but to stay at home after getting married and to turn their attention to raising families (Harrison 1997:10).

According to Harrison (1997:10-11), almost 15 percent of wives in America were working at the advent of World War II, which was an increase from the 12 percent of women who were employed in the early 1930's. Despite the fact that more women were entering the job market, women of this era were often marginalized and discriminated against in the male dominated working world.

Most contemporary white women, who are in their 50's and beyond, grew to womanhood being affected by the feminist revolution. Women aging today are often innovative, creative, independent individuals. Being old thus does not equate unavoidably with being senile, sickly, or frail (Hurd 1999:420).

According to O'Reilly et al. (2004:3) little research has been conducted about women's perception of aging. The focus on individual aging leads to various questions being asked on the subject, such as: what changes, in terms of health, abilities, attitudes, activities and social relationships, occur or affect the individual as they pass through time? How does the social context affect such changes, and to what extent do they relate to chronological aging? What impact do early life experiences have on experiences, opportunities, resources and social relations in later life (Jamieson 2002:22)?

Studying older people can have implications for social care and the general understanding of the older generation. It can support other research that highlights the resourcefulness and resilience of older people in terms of the most efficient ways in which the older generation would like to be managed and treated (Tanner 2007:24). It also draws attention to the importance of understanding older people's individual life stories, goals and values, and the wider meaning that the experience of difficulties, and the way of addressing them, have for them. Emotional and cognitive processes become more meaningful as a process to manage change when social activity and control in other areas of life diminish (Tanner 2007:22).

Phillipson (1998:139) suggests that in order to understand the nature of social aging, the focus should be on the *"sociology of daily living"*. He explains that it may be more beneficial to understand the distinctive ways in which *"daily life is given shape and meaning"*. He asserts that this is partially about developing a *"sociology of resistance"*, where the focus is on the manner with which they challenge situations they are confronted with, more often in private rather than public settings (Phillipson 1998:139-140). Older people in the modern era are more likely to resist than to succumb to pressures associated with aging. Although family form an important part of daily living, older people have become more independent and individualistic. Activities such as reading, gardening, or watching television are more often than not done alone or with a partner (Phillipson 1998:139).

Giddens (1999:54) believes the foundation of individual identity lies in *"the capacity to keep a particular narrative going"*. In this study I examine the meaning of identity from a sociological position, focusing on the lives of older women, and their experience of aging. The women being interviewed reveal themselves as individuals who have the ability to act and think, as well as being influenced by society. I endeavor to get a glimpse of their sense of self in terms of the body they inhabit, their mind and its capabilities, as well as their inner being, situated at a specific moment in history. The aim is to see their multifaceted identities through their eyes.

1.2 The aim and rationale of the study

The aim of this study was to gain insight into the ways older English-speaking white women in Bloemfontein, the capital city of the Free State Province of South Africa, construct their experiences of aging. I chose Bloemfontein because it is demographically situated in the Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality, one of the main hubs in central South Africa. Of the 747 000 residents (of all race groups) in the Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality, 11% of the population are white, while 5.3% of the people that reside in Mangaung are older than 65 years of age (StatsSA 2011:1). Bloemfontein (Dutch for *"fountain of flowers"*) is home to approximately 370 000 English, Afrikaans, and Sesotho speaking residents. The predominant home language of inhabitants of Bloemfontein is however Afrikaans and Sesotho.

I chose to focus on a sample of white, English-speaking women born in the 1930s and 1940s. This cohort grew up during World War 2 (1939-1945), and as whites, had first-hand experience of the renewed economic growth, rising living standards, and increased opportunities after the hardships experienced during the previous 15 years (Bohanon 2012:1). They witnessed the transition in sectors such as communication, transportation, healthcare,

computing, and science, and were also perceived as being the first generation to combine a working career with family life (Elgán et al. 2009:730).

The purpose of this research study is to provide a platform and analysis for a story to be told, from the perspective of these selected participants. Women experience many transitions during their lives, which impact on their lifestyles and perhaps their overall outlook on life. Circumstances such as motherhood, marital status, or health may change over time, which may have an influence on the way they view life. Many older women, regardless of their health and well-being, are not the dependent, restricted, non-contributing, unhappy persons they are perceived to be. Rather, they are women who adapt to their circumstances, live life within their physical means, with vigour, dignity and courage – even if accompanied by traits such as becoming irritable, making mistakes and being forgetful.

Although research covering areas such as health and aging, as well as work and retirement are comprehensive, the distinct view of the *"everyday life of older people"* (Gubrium & Holstein 2000a:3) is a relatively new area of study and therefore under-researched. This thesis attempts to add to the knowledge in this field.

The study is grounded in the phenomenological approach and focuses on the ordinary ways in which a group of English-speaking older white women between 70 and 80 years of age living in the Bloemfontein area, in central South Africa, experience daily living. This approach is based on an analysis of subjective, experienced life, of what living life or being an older person means to the individual. It endeavors to shed light on the aging phenomenon by listening to stories being told from the perspective of older women. Gubrium (1993:8) describes such a narrative account as the aged having the opportunity to convey their stories, to speak of life and to express in their own terms the meaning of their life experience.

1.3 Research questions

How do older adult women perceive and describe the experience of aging? What factors influence those perceptions? These questions guided me to explore the nature and essence of the older adult woman's phenomenon of aging with emphasis on the following:

a. How do older women experience physical and cognitive aging?

b. How has retirement changed the way they adapt to and manage everyday living?

c. To what extent has past life experiences shaped their present life and living arrangements?

d. To what extent has aging had an impact on interpersonal relationships within society and the family?

These questions allow for an exposition of the subjective nature of the research problem, since the questions aim at conveying the older woman's perception of what constitutes her individual lived experience of aging. This in turn is based on the phenomenological assumption that what an individual perceives and believes is what constitutes his or her reality. In defining the *"context of a situation"*, a concept that was developed by the sociologist W.I. Thomas in a monograph called "The Unadjusted Girl" in 1923 (St Clair et al. 2005:1) he argued that *"If a person perceives a situation to be real, it is real in its consequences"* (Heap 1995:52). This statement, also known as the Thomas Theorem, explains that our behavior is guided by our subjective interpretation of reality, not by the objective reality of a situation. Thomas emphasizes the fact that although two individuals may be presented with identical stimuli in a lived experience, their reaction to the situation may differ because of the manner in which they define the situation (St Clair et al. 2005:1). Creswell (2013:76) states it is the *"lived"* experience that enables the discovery of the phenomenon that all individuals have in common.

1.4 An aging population

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) define population aging as: *"the process by which older individuals become a proportionally larger share of the total population"* (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Population division 2002:1). The World Health Organization (WHO) states that the proportion of the world's population over 60 years will double from 11% in 2009 to 22% by 2050 which equates to an increase from 605 million to 2 billion older persons over the same period. According to Giddens and Sutton (2013:355), the fastest growth of the sixty-five and older age group will take place in developed countries, where families have fewer children and the life expectancy is longer than in developing countries. By the middle of the current century, developing countries will follow suit and experience their own *"elder explosion."*

This increase of the older proportion of the population has an impact on the economic, political and social conditions of a country. Although population aging was initially experienced in predominantly more developed countries, it has now become a global phenomenon and is being experienced in virtually every country in the world (Joubert & Bradshaw 2006a:204) as a result of a decline in both birth and death rates (Giddens & Sutton 2013:355).

The needs of any society are shaped by its members (Laz 1998:109). As people live longer, retirement and other social benefits are extended over a longer period of time, which adds to the economic burden of a country. Increased longevity also equates to increased medical costs and demands for health services, since older people are generally more vulnerable to chronic illnesses (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Population division 2002:1).

In almost all countries it is found that women generally live longer than their male counterparts. Women reaching the age of 60 can expect to live an additional 20 years in less developed countries compared to the 25 more years of those women in developed countries. (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Population division 2002).

This gender imbalance means that there are more widowed older women than men. Since women currently in their 60s or 70s have had less formal education than men, and tend to have less access to private income sources, they are more likely to be financially under-resourced in older age (Joubert & Bradshaw 2006a:204). Willson (2007:152) states that a higher proportion of women are widowed at old age than men because women generally live longer than men and because they tend to marry men older than themselves. In addition, because of the caregiving role women occupy to accommodate family responsibilities, their employment histories appear to be interrupted or shorter – and in some cases even absent. These factors, coupled to the fact that women's incomes are generally lower than their male counterparts mean that their incomes in later life are lower, which contributes to their economic insecurity.

On the African continent, only Nigeria has a higher older population (5.42 million) than South Africa's 3.28 million older persons (60 years or older) (Joubert & Bradshaw 2006b). The total proportion of older South Africans (65 years and older) was expected to increase from 3.4% in 1995 to 7.5% by 2025 (Pelser & Redelinghuys 2009:17). According to the United Nations Population Division (2012), the figure of older persons over the age of 60 in South Africa was given at 8% in 2012, and is estimated to rise to 15% by 2050.

1.5 Growing older in the (not so) new South Africa

Older South Africans grew up in a variety of circumstances. Under apartheid rule, and further back during South Africa's colonial occupation, the country saw stark divisions between

black and white race groups. Under the previous white government, those who were white had better opportunities for self-advancement, which meant more successful aging because the white minority had, through the centuries, been comparatively advantaged, especially in terms of wealth (Ferreira 2000:32).

1994 was a year that all South Africans will remember. It was the year that spelt out political freedom for all who lived in South Africa – the end of apartheid. Yet, it was in 1996, when the new constitution was adopted, that changes became reality for the average South African. In Thabo Mbeki's (the ANC Vice-President at the time) famous speech *"I am an African"*, was the beginning of what is referred to as the African Renaissance.

Renaissance as a concept promotes a positive vision of Africa. It was a vision of Africa being a peaceful, democratic, and vibrant market orientated continent, offering an African alternative to fundamental European concepts (Theilen 2003:95). The end of apartheid in 1994 meant that by being a white South African one had to adapt to become African (Mathews 2011:2). Not only had apartheid been abolished, but government policies in virtually every aspect – housing, health, education, welfare, industrial relations, labour, employment, energy, transport, water and sanitation to name a few – had been re-evaluated or were earmarked for re-evaluation with the intent of bringing about change and equality (Horowitz & Kaplan 2001:12).

This contributed to the fact that the white minority population in the post-1994 South Africa faced uncertainty about their future in the country. Earlier fears of a political and economic meltdown were later replaced by lesser, more chronic worries. An unanticipated negative effect of the transition was an increase in criminal activity (Horowitz & Kaplan 2001:13). The increase in criminal activity was brought about by the lifting of influx control measures in 1988, which meant an increase in migration from rural areas to the cities in search of a

better life and were mostly unemployed. The authorities in the urban areas were not prepared for this massive influx of migrants. Since most urban areas lacked infrastructure to provide housing, essential service, and employment, sprawling informal settlements of shacks mushroomed on the peripheries of cities (Ferreira 2000:39). The perceptions of criminal activities in urban areas and pressure from concerned family members to relocate made the transition from established homes to a more secure place of residence, such as a retirement facility, easier to accept.

Although gender equality was given legal status in the new civil constitution in 1994, change is slow, and prejudice and discrimination against women still remain an aspect within the South African society. One of the ways used to cope with such prejudice and discrimination is to join women's organizations. In such organizations they often find friendship, they find support and a place where they have the freedom to display their own talents. It is therefore one of the reasons why women's organizations such as the Methodist Woman's Auxiliary (WA) is home to many women, especially the older women in this study[1]. Besides caring for the spiritual growth of women, engaging in and encouraging evangelical outreach, the WA have regular meetings where they conduct devotions, bible studies, and prayer meetings, as well as keeping postal contact with women unable to attend regular Branch Meetings (Oosthuysen 1999:2).

1.6   Sociological research concerning aging

This study is important because of the impact aging has on social factors such as economic status, social support and healthcare. An increasing aging population poses a challenge for governmental institutions because of the impact it has on the economy in terms of extended pension and healthcare plans (Willson 2007:148). While the number of beneficiaries of

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[1] Discussed in greater detail in 6.3.4.

pensions and healthcare increases, the number of contributors to these funds decreases (Bloom et al. 2011:6).

Bloom et al. (2011:8) go on to state that retirement in most developed countries is perceived as a complicated process since it is guided by extensive policy adjustment options. It is often more than a transition that involves choices such as early retirement, partial retirement, or un-retirement, where persons are allowed to continue regardless of their age. In most developing countries, the legal requirement for retirement age only applies to a small portion of the labour force. In some instances, such as small business enterprises, membership of pension schemes is uncommon. People thus often need to work until they can no longer do so and become dependent on a state pension, or are dependent on their children. For some, what is supposed to be the nest-egg retirement payment is often used on leisure activities such as travelling before they settle down.

The various issues involved in aging, such as the actual experience of aging (Hazan 2000:19), the effects of retirement (Savishinsky 2000:125; Stephens 2000:145), interpersonal relationships (Mathews 2000:155), and the aging body and mind, are often perceived in a negative way since it is coupled with aspects such as inflexibility, mental decline, and illness (Gubrium & Holstein 2000a:1). On the other hand, people over the age of 60 are afforded the status of being more experienced and knowledgeable (Bloom et al. 2011:7), and are often entrusted with roles such as grandparental child-minders which allows the younger generation to concentrate on carving out a life for their respective families.

While many gerontologists focus on aging theories such as disengagement theory (part of structural-functionalism), as well as activity theory and modernization theory (of which both are grounded in a functionalist perspective) (John 1984:84), this study will be based on an interpretivist approach.

Within the interpretivist paradigm I will implement a phenomenological approach to capture the essence of the lived experience of older women. It is based on the analysis of the subjective, experienced life; of what life and/or being an older woman means to the individual. The terms *"life experience"* and *"aging experience"* recognize life as experienced within a community – the life-world.

Alfred Schütz (1899-1959), the founder of contemporary phenomenology, notes that individuals approach the life-world with a stock of knowledge made up of constructs and categories that are found in everyday social life. This stock of knowledge creates a world with which people are familiar and within which they operate. As experience is seen to give shape or structure, the stock of knowledge is extended and altered in practice (Gubrium & Holstein 2000b:489).

Powers & Knapp (2010:93) argue that all humans are constantly engaged in the process of making sense of their life-worlds. Phenomenological enquiry focuses on the lived experience and how humans make sense of those experiences (Smith et al. 2009:3; Overgaard & Zahavi 2009:93). It attempts to develop rich descriptions of the way phenomena are experienced by these elderly individuals or groups, and to understand the meanings they attach to their experiences (Higgs & Cherry 2009:10). Aging and everyday life revolve around what elderly people make of who and what they are, and how they view their worlds (Gubrium & Holstein 2000a:3).

This study focuses on English speaking, white women between the ages of 65 and 80 years who live in the Bloemfontein area in order to understand their view of the ageing process. A purposive sampling approach was mainly utilized to select research participants for the study.

1.7 Qualitative research strategy and design

To gain understanding of the participants' life-worlds, in-depth interviews formed the foundation of data collection. Although this study was based on a pre-set theme, this method of data collection afforded both the participants and me the freedom to respond and explore issues we deemed as important or relevant to the research question/s. The interviews were recorded to enable accurate transcription of their detailed accounts.

The data was analyzed by determining categories and themes or patterns in the data, which was transcribed. I endeavored to "tell the story" by attaching meaning to what was found. Interpretations were also compared to similar research that was done on the chosen topic.

1.8 General significance of the study

This study attempts to understand aspects of the life-world of the older generation. It undertakes to show the everyday realities of older people and how they see and experience aging.

Given the changing nature of contemporary society, it is important to look beyond the categorization of being young or old. Modernization has had a major influence on the living conditions and lifestyles of people living in Western society. People are living longer than previous generations. Older people often have the opportunity to see their grandchildren become adults and grandchildren often have the privilege of getting to know up to four living grandparents. The decreased mortality rates have resulted in a changing profile in western society. Being forty years old in a developed country may mean the advent of mature adulthood, while being forty in some developing countries can be interpreted as being in one's late life. Giddens and Sutton (2013:353) sum it up by stating that *"unequal life chances illustrate in a stark way the very different ageing experiences of people across the world."* The growing aging population does however not mean that older people should be seen as a

burden. In many societies, older people are still viewed as respectable and knowledgeable people who carry with them a wealth of experience that could assist in making productive economic and social contributions.

1.9   Structure of the study

This thesis is organized in the following manner:

The current research undertaking comprises both a theoretical component and an empirical component. The theoretical component contains the literature review, as well as the research methodology used in the study while the empirical component contains the analysis of the interviews had with the research participants in this project.

The first two chapters attempt to situate the research within a theoretical framework, as well as giving a literature overview to several relevant themes. The first chapter introduces aging as an area of study as well as giving a brief historical background of aging and how the world has experienced an increasing aging population.

The second chapter provides a review of literature relating to the concept of aging. This review provides a background to research conducted in the field of older women and aging. The review includes aspects such as aging and its meaning, the stereotypes related to aging, feminism, retirement, interpersonal relationships and living arrangements, spirituality, and the aging body and mind – all components found to be relevant in the lives of participants in this study. The purpose of the literature review is not only to justify the importance of the themes highlighted, but also to incorporate various viewpoints regarding the aging experience.

In the third chapter the topic of identity and roles will be discussed from the perspective of the older woman. After pointing out the various definitions pertaining to identity, the focus

shifts to how identities change during the life course and how the various roles have an influence on the older woman's changing identities.

The fourth and fifth chapters outline the methodological framework used to conduct the study. Chapter four discusses the ontological and epistemological considerations, which includes a theoretical overview of phenomenology, the life-world, existential and reflexive sociology. It ends off with how stories, as told by the research participants, form the basis of narrative enquiry. Chapter five is the methodological account which includes the method and procedure used to conduct this qualitative study.

The study concludes the empirical component of the analysis and findings in chapter six. The research project conveys the participants' own accounts about their personal perceptions and experiences of aging. This perspective provides an alternative reality from that provided by the literature review. The study therefore aims to illustrate how individual women feel about getting older and how their lives have been affected by the various aspects of the aging process.

Chapter 1 introduced aging as a concept of study. In this chapter I gave a brief overview of my approach used to investigate the aging experience of older women and how the increasing aging population has become a global phenomenon. The next chapter concentrates on the concept of aging, such as the meaning of aging, the social construction of aging, stereotypes, and concepts that have bearing on the lives of older women, such as, retirement, social interaction with others, living arrangements and spirituality. When reading through the analysis in chapter 6, I request that the reader keep in mind the foundation laid in chapter two, since it underpins the concepts used to interpret how the older women in the study experience aging.

CHAPTER 2

2   Theories of aging

Bond, Briggs & Coleman (1993:19) believe that the study of aging is a *"multidisciplinary enterprise"* that includes biological, psychological and sociological theories. Although each of these disciplines focuses on different aspects of the aging process and each has its own theoretical perspective, makes its own assumptions and uses its own methods, they often complement each other. Some of these approaches are included in this study, with the main focus being on the sociological perspectives of aging.

Interpretive researchers in the sociology of aging emphasize *'understanding'* and *'meaning'* in the development of theory. Glaser and Strauss (1967:239) state that many interpretive researchers start out with a minimum of a priori assumptions regarding relationships between phenomena when gathering their data. As observations are made, data is gathered and themes of meaning start emerging. These patterns are used to guide understandings and explanations in their studies.

Bond et al. (1993:20) warn that regarding theories as right or wrong is a mistake. No single theory is a completely accurate representation of reality. Some however do provide better insight into a phenomenon than others do. They go on to say that: *"The usefulness of any theory depends on how it functions: first, to explain past events; second to predict future events, and third, to generate new theory."*

Gerontology is a *"multidisciplinary field"* of study of aging (Jamieson 2002:7). While it draws on both the physical and social sciences, it addresses research issues which concentrate specifically on the study of aging (Jamieson 2002:21), such as the disengagement and activity theories of aging. Before giving an overview of the disengagement and activity theories, I

give a brief explanation of gerontology as a discipline. According to Jameson (2002:21), gerontology places emphasis on understanding *"individual (changing) lives in the context of (changing) social structures"*, where the key emphasis lies in the passing of time, both for the individual in a social context and society. Gerontologists study the social, psychological and biological aspects of old age and aging (Kendall 2011:382). The multidisciplinary nature of gerontology means that there are various sub-fields, as well as associated overlapping fields such as sociology and psychology. Social gerontology is a sub-field of gerontology that focuses on the *"social lives of older people"* (Gubrium & Holstein 2000a:1). Two theories stand out as the main theories in gerontology; disengagement and activity theories.

Disengagement theory and activity theory are seen as mirror images of each other; both theories propose to explain the aging process for any society. Both theories accentuate adjustment to the aging experience, and focus on role loss as the stimulus for making adjustments. Both theories state that individuals are required to adjust to physical, mental, or societal changes (John 1984:84).

Disengagement theory which is a sociological theory, proposes that aging involves a gradual withdrawal or disengagement from personal relationships or from society, which results in the marginalization of older people in society. Older people and social structures, of which they are a part, withdraw mutually from each other as aging progresses. The withdrawal is perceived as part of the preparation for death by older people (Lynott & Lynott 1996:750). Disengagement theory is deemed functional in larger societies because it creates space for younger people, who bring with them fresh ideas and new skills in roles formerly occupied by older people (Giddens & Sutton 2013:359).

This theory has been criticized by researchers who find little evidence of older people disengaging themselves from their environment (Davies 1994:10), and that many older

people disengage because of roles, not because of choice (Kritsotakis et al. 2011). Achenbaum and Bengtson (1994:759) echo this by suggesting that contrary to what the theory claims, disengagement from society is not a natural and adaptive process needed to prepare older people for retirement, and ultimately for death. What Davies (1994:10) found was that while older people's social relationships change, they have fewer of these social relationships, which are often deeper relationships. Factors such as disability, poverty, retirement or widowhood could cause people to gravitate towards disengagement. Giddens and Sutton (2013:359) argue that disengagement theory takes for granted the prevalent stereotype that later life unavoidably involves frailty, illness and dependence.

The activity theory, on the other hand, which was developed from the symbolic interactionism perspective, proposes that successful aging is influenced by the maintenance of attitudes and activities during middle age (Davies 1994:10). Activity theory attempts to address the relationships between roles, activity, self-identity, and life satisfaction. The theory suggests that as we age, we acquire new skills and take on new roles to ensure continuity. Continued engagement within society ensures the preservation of self-identity and the maintenance of a highly satisfactory lifestyle (Matcha 1997:53). The focus is on the individual and how adjustment is achieved through optimal activity. When activities and relationships are no longer enjoyed or feasible, acceptable substitutes are found.

The criticism with the general application of activity theory is that while replacement activities may be instituted by older people who are financially secure and who have the necessary social resources, older people who have a minimal income upon retirement, or who have experienced the death of a partner or spouse, may not be able to make such substitutions easily (Aitken & Rudolph 2012:21).

Another approach towards aging is that of researchers Leonard and Burns (1999:87) who studied the idea of turning-points and how they shape the lives of older women. According to these authors, the turning-point approach allows participants to select and prioritize their own significant life events, which are not often focused on in literature on aging. These turning-points involve role transitions, times of misfortune, or times of personal growth.

In their study, they ask the question: *"How does age affect the way that people perceive their lives?"* (Leonard & Burns 1999:87). The examining of *"self-perceived turning points"* as part of the life experience is advocated in narrative theory. Narrative theory suggests that: *"people tend to formulate their lives into a coherent and meaningful story […]. A person's life story then reflects his or her sense of who they are"* (Leonard & Burns 1999:87). The results of the study conducted by Leonard and Burns (1999:93) suggest that while women may experience few transitions by the age of 40, personal growth experiences continue and show signs of increasing through later life. The authors propose that the turning-point approach gives insight into how people's lives are shaped, and add that while people value the subjective importance of experiences, *"those experiences that act as subjective important turning points"* are not necessarily those that enjoy the most attention (Leonard & Burns 1999:92).

2.1 Aging and meaning

The meaning of aging differs from one person to the next, and depends on various factors in one's life, and where one finds oneself in any specific time or space. I turn to various authors to gain understanding of their definition of aging, and to highlight the broader differences between chronological aging, physical aging, and psychological aging.

In her study of aging, Simone de Beauvoir (1977:17) describes aging as a continuous transformation that takes place in one's life. As she explains: *"life is an unstable system in*

which balance is continually lost and continually recovered: it is inertia that is synonymous with death. Change is the law of life". Aging is therefore seen as a process, not a state. It is an inevitable process that affects every living being (Morgan & Kunkel 2011:1). Vincent (2003:115) sees aging as a sequence of life stages. Some stages last longer than others, but of importance is that they follow sequentially. For example, to become a grandparent, one first becomes a parent. Reaching these stages is not time specific. Holstein and Gubrium (2007:1) argue that instead of passing through distinct stages in a linear sequence, a person's life experiences are *"cumulative and reflect many changes"*, and that personal history therefore is integrated and multidimensional.

Harwood (2007:4) defines aging as: *"the passing of time for an individual – the inevitable chronological change in our age from year to year". "Chronological age is measured in units of time (months or years) that have elapsed since birth"* (Erber 2010:39). Atchley and Barusch (2004:4-5) describe aging as having two faces. On the one hand, growing older allows one to gain greater understanding, experience, and the opportunity to hone one's skills in a *"variety of activities ranging from politics to music"*. Older persons are usually the keepers of traditions, where traditional cultural values are handed down from one generation to the next. They can recall unrecorded family events that have taken place over an extended period of time. Later life can also become a time where one mellows and finds inner peace once the responsibilities of employment and child rearing have been relinquished. On the other hand, aging is seen as a negative phase in one's life, especially with the decline in physical and mental abilities. The loss of authority in the workplace coupled with the loss of income can become depressing. Some people lose their partners and friends (Atchley & Barusch 2004:5), and find it difficult to cope with the new role of being old and alone.

One might perceive aging as a process in which one grows older, but chronological age per se is seen to have a 'direct' meaning since age is merely a way of emphasizing human events

and experiences; the emphasis being on the events and experiences, not on the passage of time. The passage of time is seen as being interconnected with physical, psychological, and social changes (Morgan & Kunkel 2011:1). Hildebrand (1995:7) echoes this by adding that *"aging is an intricate, delicate and on-going process, in which we and others constantly interact with and confront our solutions from the past, our prejudices from the present and the pressures from inside and outside"*.

Physical aging, or biological aging, is inevitable due to natural processes of growing older. Signs of biological aging could include some or all of the following:

- Declining vision, due to loss of elasticity of eye lenses,

- Hearing loss, where the loss of higher frequencies occur first,

- Wrinkles, as the skin loses its natural elasticity,

- The loss of muscle mass and accumulation of fat, especially around the middle and on the thighs, and

- A decline in cardiovascular efficiency, as less oxygen can be inhaled and utilized (Giddens & Sutton 2013:357).

Yet, some of the changes perceived as being part of the natural aging process can either be accelerated or retarded. Excessive sun exposure and smoking can accelerate wrinkling of the skin. While exercise and correct dieting enhance cardiovascular functioning, surgical procedures can delay the onset of an older appearance. Some 70-year-olds are often as active and healthy as people half their age because of a healthy lifestyle (Morgan & Kunkel 2011:2). Visible cues and social statuses are relied on to judge physical age. Expressions such as *"She looks old"*, or *"You don't look like you could be in your 70's"*, coupled with emotional reactions such as admiration, disbelief, or surprise stem from a mismatch in chronological age and physical appearance and capacity.

Psychological aging is linked to changes in personality, mental functioning, and sense of self as we grow older. Although certain events during the aging process have an effect on how we perceive, adapt, or adjust to life, one's personality remains relatively constant throughout one's life. For example, one does not become wise, rigid or grumpy because of aging; the grumpy elderly person was in all probability an unhappy younger person. It has been found that although some older people show an increase in cognitive deterioration (dementia), aging does not cause the impairment (Morgan & Kunkel 2011:3).

Age is of importance because of the social meanings, structures and processes attached to it. Physical changes such as grey hair, wrinkles, slower reaction-time, or short-term memory loss are of importance because of the meaning given to these by the life-world in which we live. Society uses age to assign people to roles within a social structure, thereby categorizing people within those roles. Certain rules, may for example, determine a minimum age for employment to minimize the exploitation of younger people, while other rules determine that a person at age 65 is eligible for retirement. Rules in most societies determine that a person at the age of 65 needs to retire to make place for a younger person. Social aging refers to ways in which society constructs meanings and the experiences of aging. Social aging includes expectations and assumptions about socially acceptable behavior; what one says, does and behaves at different ages (Morgan & Kunkel 2011:4). It is seen as an *"arbitrary process of establishing what is appropriate to or expected of people at various ages"* (Atchley & Barusch 2004:4).

As the proportion of the aging population increases, so too does the society of they are part of. Morgan & Kunkel (2011:5) define societal aging as: *"the demographic, structural, and cultural transformations a society undergoes as the proportion of its population that is aging increases"*. As the number of older people increase, stereotypical attitudes and discriminatory practices decrease. If one compares magazines in 2012 to those from the 1980s, one would

notice an increase in the number of articles that feature older people and products that propose to retard the aging process (Morgan & Kunkel 2011:5).

The baby boomers who were born post-World War II (1948 – 1964), grew up during relatively comfortable economic times, where purchasing power increased and buying habits expanded due to an increase in leisure, healthcare, cosmetics, and convenience products. This had an impact on product and service development, as well as on savings and consumer demand patterns. As new groups of cohort's age, they bring with them a unique historical profile, which alters the values and meanings associated with growing older (Morgan & Kunkel 2011:6).

Fundamental to Western culture, one's youth is seen as a preparatory stage of life. Adulthood marks the introduction and tussles of achieving goals, while old age marks the achievement of most goals, as well as looking back and appreciating personal successes (Gergen & Gergen 2000:290).

The fact that people are living longer in the modern era has led researchers to explore meaning making and identity to understand the many ways in which older persons give meaning to their lives and how this affects their lived experience. Questions such as: What are the benefits of aging? What are the health outcomes of those who live a purposeful live? And, is there a connection between quality of life, the meaning of life, and personal identity? In this research similar questions are asked in the quest to understand the aging experience in the modern era (Carr & Manning 2010:21).

2.2 Reviewing the concept of aging

The rationale for reviewing literature relevant to this study is to gain a background understanding of the information available on aging as experienced by English speaking older women in central South Africa. I reviewed literature prior to data collection and analysis, to

relate the study to what others have documented. Reviewing of relevant literature assists in identifying past studies done on the topic; summarizing the present state of knowledge; identifying the theoretical base of knowledge; and it assisted me in gaining new insights into new data collection methods that may have be used (Clifford 1997:161; Polit & Hungler 1995:70).

2.3 A social constructionist view of aging

The aging experience, like any other lived experience, is often constructed by culture and the societies in which we live. The meaning of age and aging is largely conveyed by the narrative ideas formed in our consciousness. The narrative a given society encourages regarding aging, accounts for the manner in which we live and see the world. The differences in the quality of our lives *"start with our willingness or reluctance to, at any age, grow older"* (Gullette 2004:11).

Aging and the loss associated with it are part of the aging experience, but the value attached to it is constructed by culture, which means that the experience of aging can be altered. Social construction is the notion that ideas we may have, are constructed from the language, stories and values that a culture attaches to them. In this context, culture can be viewed as a *"distinct and stable set of shared meanings… it makes people who they are, formulating their identities and lives in its terms"* (Gubrium & Holstein 1999:292). Conquergood (2002:184) proposes that *"identity and culture are constructed and relational instead of essential and ontological"*. Hacking (1999:6) supports the idea by stating that a large part of our lived experience, and the world we live in, is socially constructed, and that the primary function of the constructionist view is to raise consciousness.

A world of objects and living beings exist in a finite sense, but the meaning given to this world is socially constructed. This construction of meaning is understood through language

and interaction with others. The importance of events in one's life can be determined by looking at the *"what"* and *"how"* of meaning (Gubrium & Holstein 1999:290). Gergen and Gergen (2000:83) argue that *"a pivotal assumption around which the constructionist dialogue revolves is that what we take to be knowledge of the world and self finds its origins in communal interchange"*. What we perceive to be real is brought into being by historically and culturally located groups of people.

Berger and Luckmann (1966:13) define reality as a *"quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition"*. They explain how the world of everyday life is taken for granted by members of society in the subjective manner that they lead their lives. *"It is a world that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these"* (Berger & Luckmann 1966:33). This subjective reality, a way of knowing and seeing, is learned by a process of primary and secondary socialization into institutions and symbolic universes of the objective social reality; both realities are maintained in an *"ongoing dialectic process of three moments – externalization, objectification, and internalization... What remains sociologically essential is the recognition that all symbolic universes and all legitimations are human products"* (Berger & Luckmann 1966:149).

From these different approaches it is clear that the manner in which we view and experience aging is culturally created by the stories we see, hear and live, and by the language we use to understand and explain it. Older women have their own views and stories as they construct lives, age, and make sense of the change taking place in the aging process. This project attempts to unwrap some of these views and stories. It also looks at how early feminism gave women a voice in society, and how stereotypes still exist in the world of the aging woman. To give meaning to aging as a concept, social scientists and gerontologists attempt to theorize the aging experience. The following sections, that include themes such as stereotypes,

feminism, retirement, interpersonal relationships and spirituality, are regarded as potential aspects of relevance to the participants in the study, as these sections may form part of their objective and/or subjective reality.

2.4 The stereotypes of aging

Aging is often seen as a negative process since it is largely viewed as problematic in terms of the decline of both physical and social competencies (McHugh 2000:103). Stereotypes often portray older persons as *"uncertain, cranky, senile, useless, and over the hill"* (Bee 1996:6). According to Hazan (1994:12), the language used to describe old people in society, its values and stereotypes, and the uncomfortable meaning we give to age points to the fact that the old are seemingly neglected or maltreated. *"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', or 'old age pensioners' – all serve to stigmatize the aged"* (Hazan 1994:13). Aging is therefore perceived in society as a problem, a burden, and a social issue that needs to be addressed.

Coleman (1993:100) suggests that our knowledge of aging is based on images of how people cope with problems in this phase of their lives. Featherstone and Hepworth (1993:308) agree with Coleman by stating that aging and elderly people are viewed in a negative way since they represent a form of symbolic stigmatization, which is found in everyday society, thereby giving it a negative meaning to grow old. Aging therefore is not only a biological process, it is influenced by and in turn influences the social context in which it occurs.

Chartrand and Bargh (1999:893) make reference to the "chameleon effect" to illustrate their perspective on how older women attempt to adjust, or to belong to a specific group in society. The authors focused on the mimicry of postures, mannerism, facial expressions, and other

behavior resulting from social interactions. Chartrand and Bargh (1999:893) conclude that women change their behavior to match that of others in their social environment in order to facilitate smooth interactions and to foster likening. Stereotypes generalize the experience of aging, often in a negative way, because of the failure to focus on the diversity of personal experiences. This causes stereotypes to interfere with the construction of a more favourable or positive image of aging (Featherstone & Hepworth 1993:309).

Another example of negative stereotyping can be seen in ageism. Ageism was a term introduced by Robert Butler in the late 1960's, which is defined as *"attitudes and beliefs, feelings, and behavior"* toward people based on their old age (Blaine 2013:176). According to Brossoie (2009:22) ageism is centered on *"stereotypes, myths of aging, and the language that conjures up negative images of older adults."* Fineman (2011:56) believes that adding an *"ism"* to age intensifies the meaning of aging because it suggests three things. First, it stereotypes an entire class or group of people; second, there is prejudice towards that group; and third, it results in discrimination against or in favour of a group.

This means that it can be seen in a similar vein as in the case of racism and sexism, which spells out far-reaching consequences for those affected – both psychologically and materially. Yet, Fineman (2011:56) points out that there are important differences. Those who hold racist or sexist beliefs are not likely to join forces with those they denounce or despise: people would not normally *"grow"* into a different skin colour or sex. Everybody however grows old. Those who hold an ageist view, at some stage, join the ranks of the very cohorts at which they scoff.

Although age discrimination affects older persons from both sexes, older women are seemingly more affected than older men. Because society places more emphasis on women's attractiveness, women are labeled *"old"* at an earlier age than men are. According to Sontag

(1972:29) this double standard means that physical signs of aging are judged more harshly in women than in men. Older women are seemingly viewed as less attractive than men at older ages. Women therefore are afraid of aging and fear that they may feel devalued and lonely in old age (Fodor & Franks 1990:445). Cruikshank (2009:141) agrees by stating that men do not evoke the same gender specific labels such as "old hag", or "old bat" because women are judged by their faces as opposed to the men's *"physical whole"*. While a man's "well-worn face" is indicative of maturity, character, and experience, a woman's *"well-worn"* face is an indication of the loss of a youthful appearance (Cruikshank 2009:150).

Clarke (2002:440) believes that an older woman's experience of aging and how she perceives her body is influenced by social values concerning physical attractiveness and by ageist norms that perceive older women and older women's bodies in a demeaning way. Although a pessimistic view exists in terms of aging and a woman's supposed decline in physical attractiveness exists in society, women strive to *"age gracefully"*, and believe *"they had earned their wrinkles through their life struggles and experiences and thus they were a badge of honour"* (Clarke 2002:436).

There are positive aspects to aging, such as greater life satisfaction, increased resilience, and an increase in personal growth experiences. Successful aging is often linked to life satisfaction. Successful aging is a broad concept that is open to interpretation. According to Fisher (1992:191) life satisfaction is perceived in terms of past expectations and present circumstances while successful aging can be defined in terms of *"strategies for coping in later life and maintaining a positive outlook"* on life. Rowe and Kahn (1999:27) note that successful aging has three dimensions: low likelihood of disease and disease-related incapacity; high mental and physical functional ability; and active engagement with life. Fisher (1992:194) believes that older people have greater understanding of the subjective meanings of concepts such a successful aging and life satisfaction than people who have not

yet reached a similar age. The *"healthy"* self in later life is related to positive interpretations of past experiences, is responsive to present and future challenges and to the changing circumstances that may develop.

Successful aging is thus portrayed as a life-long process based on a personal positive outlook on life[2]. A flexible attitude to life and the ability to change are valuable tools that could assist with adapting to internal and external changes. In a study done by Hilleras et al. (2001:72) in which they examined the contribution of aspects such as personality, health status, life events, social contacts, activities and religious beliefs towards life satisfactions, their results show that health and an emotionally stable personality are the most important aspects among the very old. This confirms that even in old age, a high level of life satisfaction is possible (Hilleras et al. 2001:87). It also includes the ability to "adapt one's values to meet the challenges of later life" (Bowling et al. 2005:481). It is hoped that findings such as these could assist to counter the negative stereotypes of aging.

2.5 Feminism

Although the women that took part in this study did not make reference to feminism in any way, I give a brief overview of what feminism is and how it contributed to changing the general perception of equality in society. Feminism focuses on women's experiences and the importance of gender within a societal structure. This perspective points out that women and men are equal in every way and should be *"valued equally and have equal rights"* (Kendall 2011:26). Although modern Western civilization advocates gender equality, certain roles are still associated with a specific gender. Women are still being cast in roles that define stereotypes such as being the passive, submissive gender, and are often seen as objects of quest.

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[2] Practical examples of how relationships with family and friends, and active involvement in community and church activities assist in the nurturing of a positive outlook on life can be found in the analysis in sections 6.2 and 6.3.

Besides focusing on careers and achievements, women need to fulfill added traditional roles related to family obligations and general emotional well-being. Western society often prescribes that men distance themselves from revealing emotional experiences, trauma, self-depreciation, self-doubt, and self-destructiveness, while women are often encouraged to express these aspects (Gergen & Gergen 2000:291).

Feminism is not a single, unified approach without chronological phases, and for this reason British and American literature distinguish between two waves of feminism; the first wave spanning between 1830 and 1920, while the second wave spans from the 1960s to the present (Bernard et al. 2000:9). According to Freeman (1969:1) both waves originated in periods of *"organized agitation for social change"*.

First wave feminism focused on civil rights for women and the recognition and *"enfranchisement"* of women. In the United Kingdom, feminism became dormant when women achieved the right to vote, and remained silent between the 1920s and 1960s. In America, the second wave was fueled in 1963 by the publication of Betty Friedan's book, *"The Feminine Mystique"*. It renewed the interest in the role of women in society and focused on issues such as the situation of women at home, the division of labour, childcare and parenting roles as well as issues surrounding women's sexuality (Bernard et al. 2000:9).

The 1960s and 1970s saw the entrenchment of traditional approaches to feminism, and Bernard et al. (2000:9) identified three major approaches: liberal feminism, radical feminism and Marxist, or socialist feminism. All three had a common thread in that they were concerned with the causes of oppression of women and the fact that women were seen in a category different to men.

In liberal feminism, the roots of female oppression lay in the lopsided civil rights policies and poor educational opportunities. Gender-role socialization and education of children at an

early age was seen as a key factor to change the traditional perceptions regarding appropriate masculine and feminine attitudes and behavior taught at home, at school or in the media. Liberal feminists rallied for improved childcare conditions, the women's right to have an abortion, and the elimination of gender discrimination in the workplace (Kendall 2011:373). In contrast, patriarchy, through its social, political and economic institutions was seen as the major contributor of social injustices suffered by women. This gave rise to radical feminism, where the focus was on the controlling of woman by men in terms of sexuality, reproduction, motherhood and rape. Radical feminists urge women to take control of their own bodies (Bernard et al. 2000:10).

Marxist or social feminism suggests the oppression of women is a result of the dual roles women fulfill in society. They are seen as both paid and unpaid workers in a capitalist society. They are exploited by the capitalist system in the workplace, and then exploited again by the patriarchal system at home (Kendall 2011:373). Tobias (1997:5) refers to gender as being a *"socially constructed role"*, where cultures have ways of assigning tasks, responsibilities, and privileges by gender. Gendered job segregation sees to it that men maintain superiority over women by ensuring that women occupy menial traditional female positions that pay lower wages. Hodson and Sullivan (2008:94) refer to this form of discrimination as a *"glass ceiling"* – which depict, amongst others, clerical workers being excluded from the opportunity of being promoted into male-dominated managerial or professional positions within a corporation or company. According to Kendall (2011:373) socialist feminists believe that the achievement of gender equality and the elimination of patriarchal capitalism will ensure equal remuneration and rights to women.

In terms of personal experiences, the women who form the focus in this study were all young women during the advent of the second wave of feminism. They were all affected in some way by the changes that took place during the 1960s. Better educational opportunities,

control over their reproductive cycles, abortion legislation, changes to private and public spheres of work, the sexual division of labour, and the quest for equal rights and remuneration (Bernard et al. 2000:16) were some of the changes that took place during this period of time.

The journal, *"Women & Aging"*, which was launched in the 1980s, increased the awareness that women have largely been overlooked in conceptualizations of old age. It convinces gerontologists and scientists to look beyond bio-medical conceptualizations that linked old age in women to physical changes such as menopause or illness that led to frailty. Further gender awareness among gerontologists in the 1990s saw issues such as family relationships, women's friendships, widowhood and women living alone being highlighted in gerontological, feminist and sociological literature (Covan 2005:5).

Sociological and gerontological literature has long recognized the fact that men and women are not affected by aging in the same manner. Feminization is therefore not without its problems. The different roles and responsibilities held earlier in life have an impact on later life and wellbeing, and these different roles obviously have implications for how men and women experience aspects of aging (Walker et al. 2012:221). Compared to their male counterparts, older women are more likely to be less financially independent at the time of retirement. This could be due to the gender gap in pay and the loss of earnings associated with having children and caring for them before re-entering the job market (Giddens & Sutton 2013:362).

2.6   Aging and retirement

In Erik Erikson's (1902-1994) life stages model of psychosocial development, in which he illustrates human development from birth to death, he suggests that certain goals need to be achieved at particular stages in one's life before one can progress on to the next stage, but

downplays the importance of working life on one's identity. Women re-entering the job market after raising a family may undergo changes in their identity – how they perceive themselves, and define who they are (Erikson et al. 1986:36). The emphasis is on the relationship between work, identity, and social status. Women, people at pensionable age, as well as older workers and the unemployed are some of those who are affected by the changes in identity when they no longer feel that they occupy a productive position in society. *"Participation in the labour market still remains a major determinant of status and identity in modern societies. Paid employment grants us activity, mobility, experience and expertise, as well as income"* (Bytheway 1995:52).

Margaret Walker (1999:104) defines retirement as *"the cessation of the adult role of worker,"* and in the society we live in, she argues that, *"the retired person surrenders not only a job, but eligibility for a centrally valued moral and social identity"*. The autonomy gained through the achievement of a career has a tendency of devaluing the experience of many women. She suggests an alternative view of life in terms of career by focusing on the meaning of being part of *"a relationship, a family, a political movement, a partnership, an enterprise, an institution, a creative process, a ritual event,"* thereby sharing images of life from our different involvement in society (Walker 1999:108).

Retirement is a modern phenomenon that gained momentum in the twentieth century in terms of understanding old age. In pre-modern society (prior to industrialization) people were perceived as old if they were no longer physically and economically independent (Vincent 2003:9). This varied among individuals since the physical and economic independence rate depended on influencing factors such as personal health and the work performed by the individual. Vincent (2003:9) goes on to say that modern structures segmented the life course of individuals into pre-work, work, and post-work categories.

Standardization and bureaucratization of the life course sees people retiring at age 60 or 65. Macnab (1994:2) argues that retirement could leave retirees feeling *"useless and bored, of having a limited sense of power and identity in their restricted lifestyle"*. Reitzes and Mutran (2006:333) state that this could lead to an *"identity crisis"*, since the role of worker is the foundation on which social status and self-worth is built. Retirement, where one experiences the loss of the work role, could be perceived as a negative experience. Regardless of how retirees feel about getting older, aging presents physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges not anticipated, and these challenges happen sooner than imagined. *"Inherent in the aging process is the concept and reality of loss"* (Billig 1987:9). The loss of associates, status, financial stability, and health are some of the losses that are experienced with retirement.

According to Dychtwald and Flower (1990:13), the association with the retirement age of 65 resulted in the cultural mythology that marks the beginning of old age. *"When you reach 65 you're old. It's time to quit. It's time to act like an old person... The great moments of your life are gone, and you can't expect any more to come... You're out to pasture. You're done"* (Dychtwald & Flower 1990:13). This often remains an accepted indicator of the beginning of old age. For job-holders it is customary to follow rules and to allow the employer to make many of their life decisions for them. Decisions such as: what time to get up in the morning; what to wear; and when to go on vacation is made by the employer (Atchley 2000:115). To retire successfully requires financial planning (Atchley & Barusch 2004:147).

The current circumstances older people find themselves in can only be understood by looking at their previous life course. For example, current financial situations are linked to roles occupied whilst in the labour market. It thus determines their present pension acquisition (Arber et al. 2003:3). They now occupy a role where they are expected to live within a specific retirement income without being dependent on family or the community (Atchley

2000:115). The retiree is however expected to remain the same type of person after retiring from the job-holder role.

Relationships with former work colleagues change. As the time after retirement lengthens, the interaction with former work colleagues becomes less in terms of shared past experiences. Atchley (2000:117) argues that the retirement role is defined in flexible, qualitative terms because of its vagueness. It allows a degree of flexibility in the adjustment to the new role of retirement, while job roles are seen as being more concrete and rigid. Retirement also affects other roles. The time freed up by not working allows for more time being spent at home. Although some partners welcome this, it could also be overbearing for others who are not accustomed to spending so much time with their partners.

Retirement can also mean the curtailment of previous expensive leisure activities due to economic constraints of a reduced pension payout[3]. Retirement allows for an increase in quality time to facilitate greater involvement in household activities, which is said to increase marital satisfaction in most cases (Atchley 2000:123). Retirement however need not be a *"role-less role"*. According to Reitzes and Mutran (2006:334) retirement is accompanied with rights, such as the right to economic support; and expectations, such as the expectation to manage one's own affairs without assistance. Being retired frees one to occupy multiple roles, such as the continuity of family, friendship and religious roles which could reduce the negativity that accompanies retirement (Reitzes & Mutran 2006:334).

Atchley & Barusch (2004:261) argue that retirement affects an individual in various ways. Not only does it have an influence on other roles that the individual occupies, it could also affect the health of the individual. Although a number of people carefully plan their retirement, it could happen that some may get sick and die soon after retirement. According

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[3] As shared by the research participants in section 6.3.3.

to Atchley & Barusch (2004:261), other studies show no relationship between work status and physical or mental health. They did however find that those persons, who feel in control of their own involvement or non-involvement whilst working, are healthier than those who feel they have no control of their personal lives. In some cases, the health of those who retired improved because of the reduction of stress experienced whilst working (Atchley & Barusch 2004:261).

Quality of retirement is seen by many older cohorts as determined by an *"attitude, not a life situation"*, which means that the retirement experience is positively influenced by ongoing active and meaningful engagement in life. Many older persons seek out new possibilities such as working from home (Smith & Clurman 2007:44), or spending more time cultivating meaningful relationships with partners and friends.

Reitzes and Mutran (2006:334) suggest that retirement should be viewed as an adjustment process that spreads itself out over time, and base their study on the following issues. First, adults utilize past roles and identities, even those they no longer occupy, to adjust to the new unfamiliar role of retirement. The tendency to think of themselves in terms of their former careers, lingers. The effects of the preretirement worker identity therefore affect the adjustment process after retirement. Indicators of the adjustment process could be the positive responses to the retirement experience, as well as self-esteem, and a positive self-image. Secondly, the reliance on preretirement identities may feature prominently with the onset of retirement, but become less of a feature as time passes into retirement. Thirdly, as people spend more time in retirement; their retirement adjustment could influence their sense of self-esteem. Existing identities as parents, grandparents, friends, and spouses could be used as benchmarks when adjusting to retirement and to maintain or enhance self-esteem (Reitzes &

Mutran 2006:336). When women reach retirement age, many are still actively engaged in a number of social and community, religious, leisure, and caring activities[4].

2.7   Interpersonal relationships

Social interaction and participation can be described as engagement in various activities that include interaction and shared experiences with others. Ongoing social participation leads to successful aging by promoting involvement in various living situations and related activities that build a sense of social connectedness. Social connectedness could include interaction with family, friends, and other people within society.

Social participation and connectedness create opportunities that promote activities that contribute to health and well-being, mental and physical functioning, and overall involvement. Such involvement does not only add meaning to life, it also forges relationships, encourages community participation and leisure activities that contributes to quality of life (Stevens-Ratchford 2008:1-2). Guse and Masesar (1999:528) define quality of life as incorporating *"environmental and material components, and physical, mental and spiritual well-being"*.

The concepts of life involvement and social participation can be coupled to occupational engagement, which is the participation in meaningful activities such as social occupations. Social occupations in this sense include everything ranging from recreation to productive activities. Such activities allow people to establish roles and to interact socially, which create well-being and gives meaning to life (Stevens-Ratchford 2008:3). A person's concept of self is influenced by feedback given by others, but over time the aging person becomes less dependent on feedback from others to evaluate the self. Values change with age. In early adulthood, there may be heavy emphasis on personal achievement and on creating a

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[4] As reported by research participants in section 6.3.2.

successful career. As people age, the focus on personal achievement diminishes while quality of relationships with family and friends becomes more important (Atchley & Barusch 2004:4).

Social interaction forms an important part of the aging process because it changes over time. Friendships are formed with others at various points in one's life. One starts new friendships in childhood, primary and high school, tertiary education, each job, every time one relocates, or changes in marital status, and it continues well into retirement. Mathews (2000:155) identifies three friendship styles that persons display during their lifetime – independent, discerning, and acquisitive. The independent actor lives almost exclusively in the present, and associates with people that cross his or her path in the present moment. This type of friendship may not necessarily last.

The past is of great importance for the discerning, and they attach meaning to the history of relationships formed with a few close friends. Since there would always be the possibility that friendships may be lost due to various circumstances such as death, or relocation, they do not place too much emphasis on close friendships. Besides acquiring past and present friendships, the person who displays the acquisitive friendship style may also look at the future. They look at continuing current friendships well into the future, and are open to new friendships in the future (Mathews 2000:173).

Participation in leisure, productive, and social activities not only gives meaning to life, but is seen as a vital component of successful aging[5]. Successful aging equates to the minimizing of illness and disability, continued high mental and physical functioning, and the ongoing enjoyment of everyday life. Older adults who remain socially connected are said to

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[5] Active participation in social activities makes life worth living, as shared in 6.2.2.

experience a higher level of positive well-being, which renders greater life satisfaction, spiritual well-being, and quality of life (Stevens-Ratchford 2008:3-4).

Moving from a lifetime home to retirement villages, assisted facilities, or other residential arrangements, could cause disruptions in social networks and associated routines or activities. Divorce or the death of a life-long spouse could also lead to the disruption of shared experiences and related relationships and interactions (Stevens-Ratchford 2008:5). The death of a life-long partner could be a traumatic experience and affects the surviving partner's ongoing life in the short, medium and long term (Golsworthy & Coyle 1999:21). Such a disruption could lead to the remaining partner either withdrawing from any previous social interactions, or it may create new opportunities to engage in new social networks or activities.

2.8 Living arrangements

Living in one's own home or apartment, whether it is rented or owned, means independence for the person who lives in the home[6]. In one's own apartment, one has the freedom to exercise control over one's own life. A history of physical, emotional, and practical realities is accumulated over time whilst living in one's own living environment (Kontos 2000:255), which contributes to the fact that older people are reluctant to leave their familiar surroundings to take up residence in an old age or nursing home once their health fails.

Older people's homes are an extension of their lives. Furniture and various artifacts have been accumulated over a lifetime. Family photographs of children and grandchildren usually adorn walls and table tops. When older people need to take up residence in caring facilities, they are encouraged to take personal items with them to symbolically re-create their home. This lessens the loss of individual identity associated with institutions such as old-age homes

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[6] Feelings of privacy, control and independence are shared by research participants in section 6.2.4.

(Vincent 2003:122). They cannot, however, fully recreate their former, long-term living environment.

There could be a form of hostility and suspicion towards nursing homes. For those who have enjoyed independence for a great part of their lives, nursing homes represent a loss of autonomy. Nursing homes are regarded as places that exploit old people (Stephens 2000:143). It is perceived as the final destination for elderly people who are rejected by family and society. Entry to old-age homes usually require an entry fee and continued monthly fees that often vary depending on the monthly pension of the residents. Some old-age facilities offer independent living with essential health services and amenities when needed, and are usually designed as a comprehensive facility that offers a continuum of care in one facility. Although moving to a care facility may be voluntary, it is nonetheless perceived as a major transition. Most older people are accustomed to living in a broader, age-integrated society, and moving into a care facility usually requires the selling off or getting rid of the majority of their possessions as they "downsize" to the care facility's small cottages or apartments. Moving from a mixed-age social setting to a place with mostly older people can affect both social relationships as well as individual social identities (Moen et al. 2000:560).

Although cultural traditions play a great role in food choices, food preferences seem to differ between older men and women. While older men are happy to *'get by'*, older women seem more concerned about having a 'proper meal'. Since women have traditionally been the ones to prepare meals throughout their lives, they often continue to cook meals for themselves. (Howarth 1993:69). Preparing convenience foods is often seen as not *'proper cooking'* by older women because of the conversion process by which purchased items are transformed by way of washing, slicing, seasoning, cooking and presentation (Howarth 1993:71).

2.9 Aging and spirituality

Religion and spirituality has had an influence in varying degrees on most people at some stage of their lives. Every person has the choice to either form part of a religious affiliation or to refrain from doing so. Being part of a religious organization or not depended on the environment in which the child was raised. If the parents were religious, there was the possibility that the children in those families would follow their parents' religious convictions. Kalyani Mehta (1997:103) argues that religious beliefs often have an impact in old age because it was transmitted in childhood, and reinforced in adulthood. On the other hand, those who were not exposed to religion from an early age often base their values on ideals such as honesty, justice, fidelity, and respect for others. These are seen as *"democratic dialogues based on experience rather than by reference to divine authority"*, which are principled without religious intervention (Atchley & Barusch 2004:295).

Park (2006:34) argues that religion is an avenue used to make sense of the world. It provides a framework for understanding specific circumstances such as difficulties in life. It provides both positive and negative meanings to events. Positive changes can result from difficult or traumatic experiences. Spiritual growth often occurs during times of suffering. It is through suffering that humans develop character and coping skills which enable them to manage future struggles more successfully. On the other hand, by the time most women have reached old age, they would have experienced varied degrees of highly stressful situations in their personal lives. Although most of these stressors may have been resolved, they could influence current adjustment to life, such as living after the death of a life-long partner (Park 2006:35).

King (1993:5) proposes that spirituality *"has to do with the age-old human quest to seek fulfillment, liberation, and pointers towards transcendence amidst the welter of human*

experience". Spirituality in later life leads to finding fundamental meaning of life, responding to meaning, and having a relationship with a higher being or God. Aging persons are drawn towards contemplative activities, which for many translates into searching for *"life-meaning"*. Spiritual experiences and expressions are influenced by this search for *"life-meaning"*, especially in old age where various realities are associated with end of life (Manning 2012:96).

Spiritually is also used as a means to cope with stressors of daily living, such as lack of finances, health-related problems, and loneliness[7]. Other stressors that affect older persons are emotional and psychological dissatisfaction that could be linked to regrets over past life experiences, depression over the death of a spouse, or the involuntary change in residence, such as moving from a home that has been occupied for an extended period of time to an old age home or institution (Mehta 1997:104). Golsworthy & Coyle (1999:23) suggest that the bereavement period is usually complete when feelings and levels of functioning return to what it was before the loss of a partner. Phenomenological theory however suggests that it is not possible to return to a pre-traumatic state. This is supported by the findings that bereavement or other negative events that are life-changing could be a catalyst for fundamental changes within the individual (Golsworthy & Coyle 1999:23). Spirituality may provide an environment of support in which the bereaved person's individual reality can be made sense of.

Atchley & Barusch (2004:294) describe spirituality as a holistic inner domain that people use as a guideline when dealing with *"existential issues such as the meaning of life, the existence of God, the cause of and cures for human suffering, and the meaning of death"*. It assists in giving clarity to these issues from a rational, practical, emotional, and motivational point of

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[7] In sections 6.2.7 and 6.4.4 research participants share their views on the influence of religion and spirituality in their lives.

view. Sadler and Biggs (2006:270) define spirituality as *"a personal search for meaning and purpose in life"*, and religion as *"an organized system of beliefs"*. Although issues concerning spirituality and religion are confronted from an inner, personal perspective, most people view the inner experience of spirituality and socially constructed religion as inseparable.

Religion is a social institution that attempts to lay the foundation for an opportunity to benefit from the religious knowledge and spiritual insights of past generations (Atchley & Barusch 2004:294). Manning (2012:97) believes religion refers to *"the search for significance in ways related to the sacred"*. According to James Coleman (2007:297), Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) defined religion as a *"unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them"*. Religious beliefs, philosophies, and rules are therefore created to serve as guidelines for living a morally good life.

How does religion make an impact on human beings? According to Simmons (1999:9), religion is described as *"the pervasive human quest to sort out profound life questions regarding identity and relationship"*. World religions present their own unique patterns of symbols, activities, statements of beliefs, and buildings. Coleman (2007:297) points out that the word *"church"* as used in Durkheim's definition of religion makes reference to Christian religions. Since all the research participants in this study adhere to Christianity, I will not discuss other religious institutional configurations. Coleman (2007:297) goes on to say that while "sacred things" appear to be of importance in most religions, they are not the prerequisite of leading a religious life. Although religion is seen as the answer to bringing relief from personal suffering, it has also been the cause of suffering for many as a result of religious conflict among those in society (Atchley & Barusch 2004:294). A study done by

Manning (2012:102) suggests three domains that represent how spirituality as realm is experienced by older women: being deeply grateful, engaging in complete acceptance, and having a strong sense of conviction.

The women in Manning's study were found to express gratitude for almost everything in their lives – the good and the bad experiences they have witnessed in their lives, as well as their longevity. Gratitude was grounded in their close connection they had with their religious beliefs and spirituality (Manning 2012:103). They also practiced acceptance – acceptance of life's complexity, as well as acceptance of how they lived their lives and of the aging process. There was a resistance to change situations that were perceived as uncomfortable or beyond their control. They accepted that their physical mobility was decreasing as they aged and that they were no longer able to cope with various tasks they were able to perform in their youth. While they did not welcome the thought of dying, they were not afraid of dying (Manning 2012:104). The women indicated that their sense of conviction was directly related to their spirituality. It gave them the strength to deal with challenges. Spirituality was interwoven throughout their narratives of life and formed an important part of who they were (Manning 2012:106).

Stuckey (2001:2) offers the following distinctions: *"Religion is a particular doctrinal framework that guides sacred beliefs and practices in ways that are sanctioned by a broader faith community. It is a system of beliefs and practices that help structure how people worship. Spirituality refers to beliefs and practices that connect persons with sacred and meaningful entities beyond themselves. These beliefs and practices often create and sustain a personal relationship with a supreme being as defined according to one's own beliefs, and give meaning and purpose to life".* Although these components can be differentiated, they are interwoven and closely knit to form a structure of how spirituality or religion is experienced by the older women in this study. Spirituality and religion are often perceived as being

interchangeable terms used to make reference to major life events that are of importance to them[8].

According to Coleman (2007:301) religion plays a major role in personal identity by defining you as a particular type of person. Those who are more religiously involved and committed often define themselves as being more moral, more spiritual and wiser than other people. Some religious groups may proclaim that their faith is the one true faith that will reap the heavenly rewards in the afterlife. While such beliefs reinforce self-esteem, they can also raise fear and anxiety among those who fail to live up to the expectations of the religious group.

Atchley and Barusch (2004:301) state that there is a steady decline in church attendance among those older than 75 years of age. This is mainly due to health reasons and increased disability. Those elderly people who are affiliated to a religious denomination usually display informal religious practices, which consist of scripture reading, prayer, meditation, and listening or watching religious programs either on the radio, or on television. Older persons were also more likely to read scripture for physical comfort as well as for the soul since they often had more time at their disposal to do so[9].

2.10 The aging body

Males and females often view bodily aging from different perspectives. Most people identify themselves as either male or female, and become aware of changes taking place as they age. Bodily changes mark various stages in one's life, which is carried through from an early age right into old age (Gergen & Gergen 2000:288). As distinct bodily changes mark adolescence, so too, does bodily changes signal the advent of old age. Moody (2006:36)

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[8] In section 6.2.7 research participants refer to leaning on spirituality or religion as coping mechanism, especially in times of adversity. It gives meaning and purpose to their lives.
[9] As mentioned by the research participants in section 6.2.7.

describes aging not as a *"disease"*, but as a process of change, part of which may make us "vulnerable to disease".

Biological aging[10] involves various processes that do not progress at the same rate. Different physical functions not only mature at different stages in one's life, it also varies from person to person (Atchley & Barusch 2004:4).

Besides involving aspects such as losses of social relationships and work productivity, the social representation of aging also involves losses in terms of physical beauty and the natural decline of the body. The social representation of the body focuses on two broad concepts of aesthetics – beauty, and health/well-being (Camargo & Wechelke 2010:24). For women, great emphasis is placed on physical beauty from a young age, which is coupled to self-worth. For men, the focus is on being athletic, which is linked to achievement and strength. These attributes often follow throughout adolescence into adulthood, where both sexes use their strengths to attract the opposite sex. *"The body… tends to be characterized as servant to the master's plans and purposes, whether for career or pleasure"* (Gergen & Gergen 2000:295). In adulthood, the man's focus on the body diminishes while the focus on a career becomes priority. The diminishing focus on the body could be the reason why men age at a greater rate in adulthood compared to women, who are still expected to take great care of their bodies.

Mary and Kenneth Gergen (2000:299) suggest that three primary reactions to bodily aging dominate from a male perspective in old age. The first is the self-congratulatory theme where the maintenance of reasonably good health is seen as an achievement. The second is the begrudging admission, where the mind is seemingly sharp but the frequency of visits to the doctor signals that the body is showing signs of deterioration. The third orientation is seen as

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[10] Discussed in section 2.1.

a trauma of broken defenses where it is no longer possible to fight off the vulnerability of being old.

As people age, tasks previously taken for granted now become increasingly difficult to perform. This is especially evident after age 50. The number 50 is significant in many ways. Although one is almost two-thirds the way through one's life at age 50, if seen from a chronological standpoint, it is an age that suggests being at a mid-point, and is associated with psychological consequences of 'middleness', or being in-between things (Karp 2000:71). It is an age where you start to realize that your inner feelings concerning your abilities do no match your actual chronological age (Karp 2000:69). At age 50, having lived for half a century, it is seen as a benchmark as far as birthdays are concerned. Most societies deem reaching this age as symbolic and arrange special birthday parties to celebrate this milestone (Karp 2000:71).

2.11 The aging mind

As with all other organs in the human body, brain function declines with age. Yet, while certain functions decline, others increase or remain fairly constant. While the aging person's mathematical problem-solving may decline, vocabulary command increases or remains constant (Atchley & Barusch 2004:4). According to Giddens and Sutton (2013:357) memory and learning ability does not show a significant decrease until very late in life for most people. The speed at which one recalls or analyzes information may often decrease, which gives the false impression of mental impairment. The rate of cognitive decline varies among individuals though. Bowling et al. (2005:480) suggest that cognitive impairment is not inevitable and despite functional decline, most people do not develop Alzheimer's disease.

According to Schaie (2006:15-16), cognitive change displays four major patterns over time. They are: normal aging, successful aging, mild cognitive impairment, and dementia. Normal

aging is characterized by good cognitive functioning by those in their 50's or 60's. There are however people in the 60 to 80 age group who display high cognitive functioning despite possible physical frailty. Successfully aging persons are perceived as those who are *"genetically and socio-economically advantaged"* (Schaie 2006:16). These are persons who actively engage in cognitive stimulating activities for as long as possible. People in this group display *"very modest decline on highly speeded tasks"* and usually maintain a level of intellectual functioning until death. Mild cognitive impairment may or may not lead to dementia. The fourth pattern concerns those who are diagnosed with dementia (Schaie 2006:16).

Dementia as a disease is commonly associated with aging. Disease, disability, social adversity, lifestyle, and environment are all aspects that are hypothetically reported to cause aging. The prevalence of dementia, also known as Alzheimer's disease, shows a sharp increase with age. Pathological studies done on individuals over age 75 strengthen the argument regarding this progressive disease. This evidence is however inconclusive since the same results were found in other studies on individuals in this age group that had no premorbid diagnosis of dementia (Goodwin 2000:333).

The biomedical view suggests that dementia has three basic features. The first is that dementia is pathological and individual, and is an abnormal condition of mental impairment and dysfunction. Secondly, it is *"somatic in etiology"*, which is caused by progressive deterioration of the parts in the brain that control memory, language, and other intellectual functioning. Thirdly, although there is currently no known cure for dementia, it can be controlled to some extent by means of chemical and/or physical constraints (Goodwin 2000:344). According to Schaie (2006:18) the absence of chronic illness, high socio-economic status and living in a stimulating and positive environment lessens the risk of cognitive decline. Rowe and Kahn (1999:135) suggest that a *"complex"* environment

offering a variety of *"stimuli, choices, and opportunities"* can have a positive effect on cognitive functioning.

This chapter laid the foundation for what aging means and how the various concepts such as retirement, social interaction with others, living arrangements and spirituality impacts on the lives of older people, specifically the older women that were part of this study. In the next chapter I attempt to unwrap the meaning of identity within the aging experience, and how various social roles have an influence on who these older women have become in the aging process.

This chapter started off with defining the meaning of aging, and how aging is often constructed in terms of the culture and the societies we live in. I outlined some of the theories of aging that are relevant to the study, and present concepts such as the stereotypes of aging and feminism. Since all the research participants in the study are retired, I conclude chapter two by looking at how other scholars view aspects such as retirement, interpersonal relationships, living arrangements, religion, and physical aging – all of which are very relevant to the aging experience of older women.

CHAPTER 3

3 Aging and identity

Identity as concept was introduced into the social sciences in the 1960's, where it was popularized in the field of psychology. Erik Erikson, makes use of identity as concept to coin the phrase *"identity crisis"* (Brubaker & Cooper 2000:2) to explain conflicts people face in their development years, and life changes such are retirement[11]. It is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself (Wetherell 2010:6). Wetherell (2010:6) points out that identity as a concept is not very clear, and is difficult to define.

Identities have been hypothesized as the various meanings attached to the self. Although the concepts of self and identity overlap, identity has generally been described as only one *"component of the self"* (Vryan et al. 2003:368). Identity therefore reflects the individual's location within social structures, which can be situational and short-lived (e.g. customer, salesperson, etc.), or reasonably stable and characteristic of social relations over an extended period of time (e.g. identities based on gender, sexual orientation, occupation, etc.).

The classification of identities as situational, social or personal (Vryan et al. 2003:368) is useful for differentiating between the short-lived and the more stable components of one's identity. While dynamic situational identity found in specific social interactions and static personal identity refers to aspects such as a name, personal history, or biographical information, social identities are reflected in socially constructed groups or categories of positions within social arrangements (Vryan et al. 2003:371). These groups or categories usually represent relevant socially constructed classifications of people (e.g. woman or older individual), or important social roles an individual occupies in society (e.g. mother, wife or

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[11] As discussed in section 2.7

employee). Social identities connect the macro level of social structure with the micro level of individual meaning and action.

Symbolic interactionists such as Blumer and Goffman emphasize that identities are fluid and are actively negotiated by the individual (Gecas 1982:10). It must be noted, however, that not all social actors have equal power to redefine a woman's social roles and structural positions. *"As women […] attempt to negotiate their identities, they are doing so with constructions that are not reflective of their own life experience"* (Stewart 2003:767). Because women often have had limited opportunities in the past compared to men, it may have influenced their opportunities to change their social identities in ways that would allow them to maintain favourable identities throughout the life course. This study was based on the assumption that identity may change during older adulthood.

Existing literature suggests that despite the negative associations of women's aging, women's actual experiences of aging may vary to some degree. For some, aging may be associated with various losses and with a threat to their identities, while others may turn their back on such negative references to aging and embrace a more positive view of aging. There are women who may choose to remain relatively neutral with regards to societal prejudices. They may choose to experience aging either positively, or neutrally.

Retirement is generally accepted as the point in time where old age begins (Jones 2006:11). People who have retired are often referred to as the *"young-old"*, a term that projects a degree of uncertainty of their age identity. They belong to the category of being elderly, yet they often do not feel as old as they are (Teucher 2010:91). Identities change as people age. Kaufman and Elder (2002:169) argue that as life expectancy has increased, individuals reevaluate their views of aging, and the authors draw on Erving Goffman's concept of identity. Goffman (1922-1982) saw identity as the subjective sense of an individual's own

situation, as well as his or her own continuity and character that is obtained as a result of various social experiences.

In a study involving women and men in their sixties, Miner-Rubino, Winter, and Stewart (2004:1599) explore feelings of identity certainty (*"an affirmed sense of self and of one's place in the social world"*), confident power (*"feelings of mastery and competence"*), generativity (*"a preoccupation with a world beyond the self and a desire to make a contribution to future generations"),* and concern regarding aging (*"the popular conception of aging as a preoccupation with 'time left', the approach of death, and decreased physical strength and attractiveness"*) at various stages in participants' lives – during their twenties, forties, and sixties. Both women and men report higher levels of identity certainty and confident power at advanced ages. Men, however, score higher on these variables. The authors conclude that the subjective experience of aging appears to be generally positive for both genders, although concern about aging increases among both women and men.

In the same vein, Jones (1994:38) found that the aging process can at times lead to increased acceptance of oneself and of other older women, challenging dominant understandings of aging as catastrophic and finding alternative ways to affirm oneself. The author continues by stating that aging can be a complex and conflicting experience, generating feelings of both loss and increased acceptance.

Bowling et al. (2005:482) argue that survey research done in the United Kingdom among older people showed that the older the research participant, the later the age the person stated that old age was perceived to begin. The authors go on to state that age concepts used by older people are based on personal indicators, expressed in such phrases as *"feel an age"*, *"look an age"*, and *"do age"*, and that when using such concepts, many older people

describe themselves as feeling 10-15 years younger than their chronological age[12]. Most people do not see themselves as old, unless they refer to age-related health issues.

McAdams, (in Leonard & Burns 1999:87) states that identity comprises *"an internalized narrative integration of past, present and anticipated future which provides life with a sense of unity and purpose"*. People rewrite their life stories on an ongoing basis, which *"directs future choices and goals and makes sense of past experiences"*. These authors note that there has been a shift from a *"traditional story-line"* to a *"neo-traditional story-line"* in which the role of paid worker is added to a woman's traditional role of wife and mother (Leonard & Burns 1999:87). This means that important changes are incorporated into the life story or narrative.

3.1 Development of identity

The initial formation of identity, as well as the changes and developments in identity are largely dependent on stimuli derived from personal experience therefore the development of identity is closely related to the environment in which it functions. Identity formation is an internal process, but the way to gauge the nature and impact of identity is by observation of the outward manifestations thereof; usually by means of actions that are motivated by identity.

Identity can be linked with the sense of belonging (Weeks 1990:88). This sense of belonging is established by factors of commonality with other individuals as well as factors that differentiate people from one another. The perceived similarities and differences found in everyday social environments form the basis on which our identities are formed. Within these perceived similarities and differences two dimensions of identity can be emphasized. First, a personal dimension from which core beliefs and convictions are derived, and second, a social

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[12] An example can be found in section 6.2.5.

dimension, which emphasizes the interaction with other individuals and the environment in which this interaction takes place. Gilroy (1997:301) affirms both these dimensions when stating that *"identity provides a way of understanding the interplay between our subjective experience of the world and the cultural and historical settings in which that fragile subjectivity is formed"*.

Identity should be seen as a process, not a category. It is the continuity of life history and the interlinking parts of life development that give a person his or her identity. Identities derived from aging form part of the diversity of society (Vincent, 2003:118). Mikulincer and Shaver (2007:233) suggest that the process of identity formation continues and is a concern throughout one's life, where many attain a more mature personal identity later in life. The ongoing process of creating a personal identity suggests that one enters the later years maintaining, or re-defining the meaning of one's life.

Cohen (2004:1) relates the aging process to a story of the *"Ship of Theseus"* found in Greek mythology. Over the years, the Athenians replaced each piece of wood in the original ship of Theseus as it decayed, as part of ongoing maintenance of the ship. Eventually, every piece of wood on the original ship was replaced over time. Cohen (2004:2) asks the question: Did the Athenians still have the same ship that used to be the Theseus? The point of this story is that the physical properties of an entity are neither adequate nor necessary to form its identity. Although all the replaced parts of the ship suggests that the ship is entirely new, it is in essence still the same ship. The aging adult may experience many new roles during his or her life journey, but a sense of self remains the same throughout the journey.

As people age, so too does their subjective evaluation of their aging experiences, since it is subjective to individual and historical experiences. This evaluation resonates with Goffman's concept of identity as the subjective sense of one's own situation, where character and

continuity is formed as a result of those various social experiences. Age identity can therefore be viewed as meaningful evaluations and perceptions of oneself which are influenced by social roles and experiences throughout one's life (Kaufman & Elder 2002:170).

Logan, Ward and Spitze (1992:452) define age identity as: *"the labels that reflect how people perceive themselves in terms of age"*. Kaufman and Elder (2002:170) argue that age identity is linked to well-being. Aging is supposedly accompanied by a decline in health. Those who feel the decline in health will feel older, while those who feel well will feel younger[13]. It is therefore deduced that subjective age may be a more important indicator to gauge physical and mental well-being than chronological age.

Older people generally feel younger, and hope to live longer. A year of chronological age therefore does not translate into a year of age identity. As people age, they feel relatively younger than their actual chronological age. Kaufman and Elder (2002:175) argue that this may be an attempt to retard the aging process and approaching death. People thus adjust to the aging process as they age, and feel different about themselves as they age. Sociologists study how aging affects social roles (Atchley & Barusch 2004:3). The life-histories of older people provide accounts and structures that give validity to their identity (Vincent 2003:118). Themes continue to evolve, and give form to personal experience. This makes identity a cumulative process.

Life stories are constructed by piecing together memories and reflections from the past. *"Life story can be… a highly personal journey inward that can lead to new self-discovery and potential in the days to follow. The external process of sharing our experiences and telling what we know enables us to combine qualities of creativity and aging to become 'keepers of culture', the long recognized role of elders passing on values, wisdom, and a way of life,*

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[13] As discussed in the analysis section 6.2.5.

whether in the culture of a family, a geographic community, or a people bound by ideology" (Cohen 2001:233-234).

These life stories change as one grows older because with aging, one accumulates more experiences from which to draw, and the distance from which one evaluates past events increases with time. Ongoing restructuring allows individuals to connect the parts of the past that they deem as important with who they are in present (Kaufman 2000:103). In his *"Essay concerning human understanding"*, the British philosopher, John Locke makes reference to the fact that the identity of a person is tied to memory; it extends as far back in time as the person has memories (Kihlstrom et al. 2003). Older people are depicted as individuals living in the past and relying on the memories to enhance the way they feel about themselves. It is common knowledge that the way to gain favour with an elderly person is to allow him or her to speak about their *"glorious past."*

3.2 Changing identities

For many, aging becomes a process of alienation from who they used to be. This process of alienation causes an identity crisis which leaves many older people wondering whether they will still be themselves when they have grown old (Esposito 1987:17). On one hand, the aged are perceived to be in constant need of company; on the other hand, they are seen as if they would rather disengage from society to be on their own. Conflicts and dissatisfactions occur when the identities one wants to emphasize differ from the identities shown by others. Differences in identities are ways of stressing similarities or differences between people (Askham et al. 1993:169).

Biological aging occurs at varied rates for different people, while chronological age differs from functional age, thereby contributing to heterogeneity in older age groups (Rockwood et al. 1994:492). Chronological age is used to determine social roles (voting, driving, marrying,

retirement, etc.). There is a significant difference between 65-year-olds and 80-year-olds, yet both are considered to be older adults. Although both groups are classified as being old, their functional statuses differ in terms of activities of daily living (Morgan & Kunkel 2011:6). Activities of daily living that affect the lives of older people include activities such as bathing, eating, dressing, and mobility. According to Sherman (1994:339), although chronological age is important in terms of age identity, research has shown that many people over the age of 65 do not consider themselves to be old. People judge themselves as old when they identify with certain criteria associated with age, such as retirement or being a grandparent. Chronological age can therefore be described as an unsatisfactory method to determine age, and Bowling et al. (2005:479) argue that the *"lay concept"* of how older persons feel may be a more useful indicator. This criticism of the use of chronological age as a variable is echoed by Settersten and Mayer (1997:236) in their reference to chronological age as an *"empty variable"* and age bracketing as *"meaningless"*. De Beauvoir (1972:13) argues that *"old age can only be understood as a whole: It is not solely a biological, but also a cultural fact"*.

Richard Jenkins (1996:19) makes a clear distinction between the concepts of individual and collective identity. He argues that while the former reflects on self, biography and embodiment, the latter focuses on categorization, stereotyping and group consciousness. Individual identity highlights differences, while collective identity features similarities. Pointing out the difference between a 65-year-old and an 80-year-old highlights individual differences, while making reference to older people as senior citizens refers to a shared identity. Identity as phenomenon can only be studied in the present; themes that have been altered or forgotten cannot form part of existing frameworks of understanding because the integration of experience takes place only in the present. *"Because of this, the informant's*

identity (or major aspects of it) is shaped anew in the process of telling the story of his or her life" (Kaufman 2000:103).

Norman Holland (1986:72) argues that as we age, we become *"both more ourselves and less ourselves"*. This conflict between body and 'true self' increases as one grows older. The way one feels does not correspond with the person we see in the mirror. Vincent (2003:7) makes reference to the *"masking of aging"*, which described the distance between one's inner age and the outer manifest aging appearance seen in the mirror and to which other people respond. The inner being is not synchronized with the outer being. Aging is an experience, and is often a confrontation with the inner self. Royle (2003:2) argues that aging *"represents a new awareness of pre-existing strangeness of the 'foreign body within oneself'"*.

Research done by David Karp (2000:68) demonstrates how people become aware of the aging process through ways that they are being treated by other people. These signs of aging are not always welcomed or internalized; research participants often comment about how they felt like strangers to themselves, where there is the feeling of a younger inner self within an older external body. Karp divides these signs of aging into four categories: body reminders, generational reminders, contextual reminders, and mortality reminders. Body reminders are physical reminders in the form of illnesses, or declining aspects of body performance. These bodily signs are usually the first to create awareness that the body one lives in is slowing down (Karp 2000:70), and raises a consciousness of aging. Generational reminders, contextual reminders and mortality reminders are discussed in the next section.

3.3 Identity and interpersonal relationships

In recent times we have seen changes in the demographic profile in the world population. Basic improvements in sanitation, immunization, and medical care have led to the decrease in the number of deaths during infancy and childhood. These improvements have also played a

significant role in the decrease in deaths of women during childbearing. This has had a significant impact in the increase of three-generational and multigenerational families, which in turn has changed the role of traditional families (Butler 1981:1). People in their fifties are caught between generations – their children and their parents. Karp (2000:72) refers to this as generational reminders. While children are establishing their own identities and becoming independent, older and frail parents of middle-aged people remind them of their own approaching old age. Middle-aged people *"see their own aging reflected in the aging of their parents, children, and grandchildren"*.

Intergenerational relationships are viewed through different mirrors. In one mirror, middle-aged people see themselves in their older, frail parents who are failing. In the other mirror, they see part of themselves in their children, where children get married and have children of their own. Grandparenthood is seen as significant because although it is a time where older adults get to enjoy time with their grandchildren, it is a reminder of aging, and instills the realization of distance, both socially and culturally, from their children and other younger people (Karp 2000:72). In a study done by Kaufman and Elder (2003:278) regarding grand parenting and age identity, they found that those women who enjoy their role as grandparent, perceive old age to start later in life, and hope to live longer. The role of grandparent may therefore be important in determining how people define themselves in terms of age (Kaufman & Elder 2003:271).

One aspect that places strain on the aging process is the situation experienced by members of the middle generation in three-generation families. They find themselves in a situation where they simultaneously need to deal with parents who need care and attention on the one hand, and children who need support and guidance in establishing themselves as adults on the other hand. The middle-aged person feels a "generational crunch", a culmination of combined stresses, vulnerabilities, and strengths of three generations. This overload of demands include

aspects such as parents guiding children who are establishing themselves as adults; having to manage their own mid-life psychological, career, and health changes; and often the increased needs and care of their parents or grandparents (Hagestad 1981:20). These inter-generational overlaps between adult family members could lead to bonds between individual family members over a period of time. These bonds are shaped by the accumulation of common experiences: *"As two or more persons have a succession of shared experiences, they develop a wider and more firmly rooted common perception of reality – setting them apart from others, who have not been part of the same experience circle"* (Turner 1970:82).

Another aspect that causes a degree of confusion in the aging process is contextual reminders. A contextual reminder is where individuals become aware of their own aging in relation to those around them. Older people are treated with respect in most organizations because of their knowledge within the organization and are often consulted for advice regarding work-related matters[14]. Society dictates the appropriate dress codes and how to act one's age. Dressing inappropriately for one's age or acting much younger is usually frowned upon and criticized by others in society (Karp 2000:74). On the other hand, besides the changes seen in role patterns of older adults, where life paths do not follow a pattern of orderly, linear progression, and where careers are interrupted and restarted, individuals often make 'loops' in the aging process. Examples of these loops are when older persons in their late forties or fifties become university students, or when older couples start a family once they have established themselves in a career (Hagestad 1981:17). Professions or job description is usually considered an important aspect of identity, but since it did not feature as important for most the participants in the study, I chose to focus on aspects that were relevant instead, amongst others, family and religion.

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[14] Affirmation regarding respectful treatment can be seen in section 6.3.6.

Aspects such as illness and dying are often less meaningful when you are younger, except in the case where it may affect those closely related (spouse, close friends or family). It becomes more accentuated when people are in their sixties or older. It is then that parents or people of the same age cohort die more frequently. It is then that people become more aware of their own aging. Karp (2000:78) refers to this as mortality reminders. Life-threatening illnesses such as cancer and heart disease in relatives and friends heighten the aging person's own sense of mortality. These conditions create an understanding that there is a limited time left to live out one's life. Nilsson et al. (2000:45) argue that one's life and reality is structured in a relatively stable manner over time. A life transition is a process that forms a connection between two relatively stable periods in life, and is initiated when there is a break in one's reality. This disruption in reality brings about changes in one's life, which causes a degree of uncertainty.

The fear of being unable to manage change, or not knowing what is to be expected in the future often becomes a turning point[15] for many in terms of lifestyle, changes in abilities, changes in identity and behavioral patterns, and changes in individual views of self or the environment in which one lives (Nillson et al. 2000:45). This is often referred to as a mid-life crisis, which takes on a negative connotation (Karp 2000:78). This mid-life crisis experienced in one's life can also be liberating, where people engage in the positive aspects of being older. Karp (2000:80) refers to the liberating fifties as a time in which accumulated wisdom and life experience could assist in the living of a fuller, meaningful life. In terms of relationships, it could mean the freedom to enjoy the 'empty nest' and relief from the responsibilities of parenthood. On the other hand, it could also mean change where couples divorce after the children have left home.

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[15] Turning points are discussed in more detail in section 2.3.

With respect to age and marriage, couples who marry at a younger age are often more likely to experience marital problems. Couples who do end their marriages much later on in the relationship, blame challenges such as raising children, boredom with the relationship, and gradual diverging interests as reasons for divorce (Amato & Previti 2003:606). Simpson (2006:2) states that on average, one in two marriages end in divorce in the modern era. Hagestad (1981:35) argues that divorce not only affects horizontal ties (between husband and wife), it also affects vertical ties (between parents and young children), where a custody arrangement is negotiated between parents. This could contribute to an acceleration of the aging process later in life due to increased financial and health constraints.

3.4   Identity foreclosure

Widowhood changes the way women cope with relationships and circumstances after the death of a partner. Because of the bond women build with their partners, they feel a loss of their own identity after the loss of a partner. Deborah van den Hoonaard (2000:90) refers to this as *"identity foreclosure"*, where these women attempt to hold onto their own identities after the loss of their partners, but fail to do so since they no longer feel that they can cope with the various roles they need to play. Although they may fulfill the role as mother, their attempt to take on the new role of mother and father contributes to the disorganization of a women's role as mother, where they no longer know what is expected of them in their new role.

Every person would at some stage in their life grieve over the loss of a loved one. This means that adults in most modern cultures experience transitions that make it necessary to experience the world and the societies they live in from a new perspective (Simpson 2006:2). Widowhood seemingly has a negative connotation attached to it for many, leaving them feeling alone, detached and lost in their new role as widow. Relationships with others often

change after the loss of a partner; two possible reasons for this are because the friends in the pre-widowed days were the friends of the deceased, or that friends had previously viewed them as a couple or a collective unit, not as individuals. The other possible reason is that friends are unable to understand what the widow is experiencing; they often feel uncomfortable or embarrassed in the company of the new widow, especially if she allows them to view her pain and suffering (Van den Hoonard 2000:93).

With widowhood come new responsibilities. Decisions need to be made without the input or guidance from a partner, and many widows find out how much they did not know, such as tasks around the home and financial matters. In traditional societies, the man is seen as being the head of the home. With being head of the home comes responsibilities that traditionally include tasks reserved for men, such as maintenance around the home and financial security. The sudden loss of a partner in a long-term relationship can increase the financial worries of the widow living alone. With the loss of identity experienced during widowhood, these women are compelled to develop new identities that enable them to cope with their new roles as single women (Van den Hoonard 2000:97).

3.5   How roles influence identities

The lives we live are structured by the society we live in. It is also influenced by our physical and mental abilities. Our daily interaction with others takes place not only on an individual level, but also on a group level as role players. A role is the *"expected or typical behavior associated with a position within the organizational structure of a group"* (Atchley & Barusch 2004:137). These authors go on to state that the roles we play in our interactions with others depend at which stage or age we find ourselves in our lives, and that we often define ourselves in terms of social roles. Understanding society's attitudes towards the old is

revealed by examining some of the roles society assigns to old people. New roles replace older roles that are no longer applicable or appropriate to the individual's life.

According to Atchley and Barusch (2004:146) age plays a role in what a person is expected to know, or what one needs to know to effectively participate in a society. Early in life, socialization places emphasis on learning the language and customs of the society of which one is part. In adulthood, the emphasis shifts toward the accumulation of knowledge and skills that enable one to contribute to society in a productive way. The parent's role as provider of physical and emotional needs and as agent of socialization fades as children grow up. So too, the role of the worker as economic contributor comes to an end, where it is replaced by the role of the retired – a role assigned to old people, one that leads to the assumption that old people now need to fill their time with a variety of leisure activities.

In old age, people continue to function in the roles they have occupied since acquiring the knowledge and skills earlier on in life, and there is not much emphasis on the maintenance or acquisition of additional knowledge or skills (Atchley & Barusch 2004:146). This is evident in modern society where older people are restricted from integrating fully into society, especially in the area of employment. As people age, it is expected that they have gained sufficient knowledge and skills to manage their own lives, which includes successful planning for retirement.

Life experiences are not static incidents. Social experiences are influenced by contemporary conditions as well as experiences of earlier life transitions. The direct consequences of earlier life experiences play a role in shaping transitions in the later years of life. This means that social experiences are influenced by external conditions when reaching old age as well as by earlier life experiences (Hareven 1981:149). This is possibly one of the reasons why

retirement is seen as a disruption in most people's lives. It is seen as an abrupt change in the transition process.

In the last decade, great strides have been made in terms of growth and diversity in plans, attitudes and research regarding aging. Rather than one singular voice, there have been a variety of policies, organizations, medical advancements, demographics and societal attitudes that have changed, and are still changing. According to Bruner (1999:9): *"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* [or her] *own life story is partly a function of social position"*.

CHAPTER 4

4 Ontological and epistemological reflections

A research approach refers to how the research was done and its logical sequence, as well as how the conceptualization of the research process took place (Creswell 2013:77). The main focus of this study is the exploration and description of the aging experiences of older women in central South Africa.

Older people form part of a diverse and complex group of people. To understand the aging process, research methodologies capable of capturing this diversity and complexity need to be harnessed. From the onset it was decided that the research approach used in this study would be qualitative. Qualitative research is used to study the complex phenomena of revealing the richness and diversity of people's lives (Denzin & Lincoln 2000:3). In the next chapter (Chapter 5) I give a methodological account of this study. But before describing aspects of the data collection, processing, and analysis in Chapter 5, this chapter will introduce some of the important issues that guided my research in terms of ontological and epistemological approaches relevant to my research.

4.1 Ontological perspective – the nature of being

According to Crotty (1998:10) ontology is the study of *"being"*. He says: *"It is concerned with the 'what is', with the nature of existence, with the structure of reality as such"*. This study's ontological approach brings about what aging is within the realm of everyday life (Wright-St Clair et al. 2011:89). My study accepts that growing older involves different views on the nature of being, as well as views that reflect often unexpressed dimensions of the aging experience. Developing openness and acceptance of the complexity of life would be

seen as a necessary step in the process that will lead towards understanding the experience of aging (Gubrium & Holstein 2002:155).

It is often said that the richness and diversity of the aging experience is to be celebrated instead of being regretted. To understand the conflict that develops between acceptance and celebration of aging, I endeavor to understand the phenomenon in a way that allows the capturing of its essence. This necessitates the simplifying or reduction of reality to manageable constructs and themes that contain the key features of a phenomenon (Schoenberg & Rowles 2002:6). To understand the complexity of experience and the structural activities that form the aging experience, it is also important to understand the aspects of aging instead of concentrating on the stark, ordered contrasts that form part of the scientific premise of control and prediction. To gain a deeper understanding, transcendence beyond the quest for control and predictability allows the phenomena and experiences being studied simply to *'be'* or *"to exist in and of themselves"* (Schoenberg & Rowles 2002:7). In this research project there will be an attempt to integrate the obligation to disclose and to investigate with a sense of mystery of life. I will endeavor to understand, but at the same time to appreciate the often unrecognized *"horizons of meaning"* (Gubrium 1993:xv) that by its very nature will remain hidden in studies of the life experiences of elderly people (Ramsay & Blieszner 1999:15). There is a close relationship between ontology and epistemology. While this section explained the meaning of ontology as the study of "being", the next section looks at epistemology as the search for *"truth"*.

4.2 Epistemology

Epistemology is a specific focus within philosophy that concerns itself with how humans determine what is 'knowledge' and what is 'truth' (Streubert & Carpenter 2003:330). Mouton (1998:28) explains that the epistemological dimension of research involves itself with the

quest to pursue valid knowledge (truth). De Vos (1998:241) adds to this by stating that epistemology is the relationship the researcher has with reality and the road taken in search of this truth. This study endeavors to explore the possibility to move towards knowledge of the aging experience of older women.

To gain a better understanding of these experiences, I will make use of qualitative research, since it allows me to get closer to the experience of the research participant. Subjective evidence that is based on individual views is thus gathered. *"This is how knowledge is known – through the subjective experiences of people"* (Creswell 2013:20). Qualitative researchers therefore focus on: the entire process of a study as opposed to just its outcome; the meaning participants attach to their life experiences; the role of the researcher as primary data collector and analyst; the inductive nature of the research process; and the process of studying research participants in their natural environment (Gubrium & Holstein 1997:3). In this study, I conducted research in the *"field"*, where the participants live, in order to gather first-hand information.

4.3 A qualitative approach

A qualitative approach as the basis for a research design has increasingly become popular in different fields of study during the last two decades. A qualitative research design is used when an issue under study needs to be understood in a complex and in-depth level. The qualitative approach can be especially beneficial to the study of aging. It is useful to determine interpretations of meaning and social phenomena, and gives an insight to the understanding of the experiences and meaning of aging used by older persons to negotiate a meaningful life (George 1990:199). I encouraged the research participants to share their stories of their aging experience and to have their voice heard by attempting to understand the participants' actual contexts or environments which are directly related to the phenomenon.

The *"primary aim of qualitative research is to develop an understanding of how the world is constructed"* (McLeod 2001:2). Researchers make use of the qualitative method of research because they believe it can assist in providing a *"deeper"* understanding about the social phenomena (Silverman 2006:32). Leininger (1985:56) refers to qualitative research as "methods and techniques of observing, analyzing and interpreting attributes, patterns, and characteristics and meanings of specific, contextual or gestalt features of phenomena under study". Qualitative research is often concerned with the collection and analysis of words (Clissett 2008:100), which means that qualitative enquiry attempts to understand what others do and say (Grant 2008:1). Understanding is itself a phenomenon which lies at the heart of qualitative research (Tavallaei & Abu Talib 2010:571).

I made use of qualitative research methods to gather in-depth information about my research participants. This information is interpreted to establish an enriched and meaningful perspective. Although *"meaning"* is important in qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen 1992:32), I endeavored not to influence the participants. My aim was to understand the overall environment and to gain a better understanding of the research participant's views in a specific situation or in day to day living.

Creswell (2013:45) suggests that qualitative research involves closer attention to the interpretive nature of inquiry, and that the study is situated within the political, social, and cultural realm of the researchers, the research participants, and readers who read the study. Creswell (2007:45) also points out that qualitative research has several common characteristics:

- It takes place in a natural setting so that research participants can be studied in their own environment.

- The researcher is a key role-player in the data collection since the data collected is done by means of document examination, observing of behavior, and the interviewing of research participants.

- Multiple forms of data are collected as opposed to relying on a single data source.

- Inductive data analysis is applied by building patterns, categories, and themes from scratch by organizing data into more abstract units of information.

- The focus is on the meaning that research participants give to a problem or issue instead of focusing on the meaning given by the researcher.

- The focus is on an emergent design, which means that the phases of the process may change or be modified at any stage of the data collection.

- Qualitative researchers view their studies through a theoretical lens.

- Researchers make use of interpretive inquiry of what is seen, heard, or understood.

- A holistic account of the problem or issue being studied is developed to gain an understanding of the problem or issue in its totality.

This study uses an exploratory, descriptive and contextual qualitative research design. Burns and Grove (2003:313) define exploratory research as research conducted to discover new ideas, to gain a new understanding, and/or to increase knowledge of a phenomenon. The researcher utilizes an exploratory method to gain an understanding and to increase knowledge of experience of aging. Polit and Hungler (2004:716) describe descriptive research as research that endeavors to portray the characteristics of persons, situations, or groups as accurately as possible. The descriptive approach was used to collect data of the aging experiences of older women. A descriptive approach in qualitative research assists the researcher in collecting accurate data and to provide a clearer understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Mouton & Marais 1996:43).

A contextual research strategy is used to study the phenomenon for its intrinsic and immediate significance (Mouton 1998:133). Contextual studies focus on events in their naturalistic environment. A naturalistic environment is an environment in which uncontrolled real-life situations occur (Burns & Grove 2003:32); which means that enquiry is done in a setting free of manipulation (Streubert & Carpenter 2003:363). The older women that participated in my research project were interviewed in their own homes and were allowed to speak freely of their life experiences. Their homes and natural surroundings are regarded as their worlds in which they feel comfortable in.

According to Mouton (2001:12) humans are members of different *'worlds'*. While an individual may fulfill different roles simultaneously in their everyday life (such as being a student, family member, member of a sports team, etc.), each of these roles require a different knowledge. He refers to this dissimilar knowledge needed in these different worlds as *"stocks of knowledge"*. He groups the knowledge needed to understand everyday life together and refers to it as *"lay knowledge"*, which he then contrasts with two other *'worlds'* that are of interest to scientists; the world of science, and the world of meta-science.

The *"first world"* (World 1) is the world of everyday life and lay knowledge is knowledge used in our daily life that enables us to cope successfully with daily tasks. This is attained through learning, experience, and self-analysis. The *"second world"* (World 2) is the world of science and scientific research in which phenomena are made the objects of methodical and arduous enquiry, where the quest for truth is the ultimate goal of science. World 3 is perceived as the world of meta-science, where the aim is to *"criticize, dissect, deconstruct, or analyze what scientists do, in order to ultimately prove science"* (Mouton 2001:13). In this project I rely on the accounts of the everyday experiences of older women who find themselves in World 1. I subsequently situate their accounts of their everyday life-worlds within a theoretical context (World 2) and attempt to make sense of these accounts and to

weigh up different ways of understanding what they offered me in their narratives (World 3). In the next sections I will introduce aspects of World 2 (the world of science) which guided my understanding. These sections therefore provide a theoretical framework for my thesis.

4.4   Phenomenological sociology

Alfred Schütz (1899-1959), known as the founder of phenomenological sociology, drew much of his inspiration from Max Weber's interpretive sociology. He attempted to combine Weber's sociology with Husserl's phenomenological methodology. According to Schütz, our experience of the world can be categorized into various *"distinct and independent provinces of meaning"* (Schütz 1962 in Overgaard & Zahavi 2009:7).

In making reference to Husserl's analysis of intentionality and the life-world, Schütz purported that the social world discloses and manifests itself in several deliberate experiences. Its meaningfulness is constructed by subjects, and to understand and address the social world from a scientific perspective, it is necessary to examine those individuals living in that social world. The social sciences study human beings in multiple social relations, and humans are multidimensional beings in the world they live in. All this needs to be taken into consideration if a holistic approach is to be undertaken to understand social reality (Overgaard & Zahavi 2009:8).

Schütz's phenomenological viewpoint emphasizes that the main objective of sociology is human beings (the way they act and experience life in relation with other humans, and within their own meaning-constituting subjective lives), and not institutions, social classes or structures of power. As in the case of phenomenologists such as Husserl, Schütz understood sociality as intersubjectivity, and proposed that we experience our social world as structured in 'strata' or 'layers' that envelop us (Overgaard & Zahavi 2009:9).

"Life experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research" (Van Manen 1990:36). *"A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon"* (Creswell 2013:76). The phenomenological research approach, therefore, was deemed the most appropriate method of conducting this study, since the study is aimed at exploring and understanding the aging experience of older women. The phenomenological approach allows research participants, through in-depth interviews, to share their own meaning of their aging experience. *"Phenomenology aims to describe a person's lived experiences"* (phenomena) in an attempt to enrich lived experience by drawing out its meaning (Holloway 2005:47).

Phenomenology is both a philosophy and research method, and refers to the meaning of the lived experience of individuals examined as it happens, and in its own terms (Smith et al. 2009:12). It also refers to the exploration and description of phenomena (Seamon 2000:158). As a philosophy, phenomenology is a way of approaching the world and capturing lived experience. It focuses on the inward experience, where one's focus is on what things are, not whether they are. Jones (1998:57) proposes that the purpose thereof is to recognize the source of behaviors as based in the *"lived experiences"* and *"life-worlds"* of existence, where lived experiences and life-world refer to subjective experiences in the world one lives in. Phenomenological research explores the *"humanness of a being in the world"* (Bergum 1991:55). According to Bergum (1991:55) the phenomenological research method is an *"action-sensitive-understanding"* presented in the practical performing of everyday life, and points to a practical knowledge of thoughtful action. Humans continuously *"interpret, create, and give meaning to, define, justify and rationalize their actions"*; allowing people to better understand themselves while simultaneously having greater insight into their life situations (Mouton 2001:19).

Through phenomenology, the researcher can gain an understanding of the experience that individuals have had of a particular phenomenon. The phenomenologist focuses on specific occurrences of the phenomenon hoping that these occurrences, in time, will lead to more general qualities and characteristics that shed light on the critical nature of the phenomenon as it exists and has meaning in the actual lives and experiences of human beings (Seamon 2000:158). Phenomenology endeavors to show that which is hidden or taken-for-granted. In this case, the visible signs of aging cloud the phenomenon of interest which is the actual aging experience (Wright-St Clair et al. 2011:89). The aim of phenomenology is to *"reduce"* the individual's experience of a certain phenomenon that enables the researcher *"to grasp the very nature of the thing"* (Van Manen 1990:177). According to Benner (1985:6) the intention of phenomenology is to go beyond aspects in life that are usually taken for granted; to *"uncover the meaning in everyday practice in such a way that they are not destroyed, distorted, decontextualized, trivialized or sentimentalized"*.

Phenomenology is rooted in philosophical teachings, and although the origins can be traced back to Kant and Hegel, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) was seen as the father of phenomenology (Groenewald 2004:3). Hermeneutical phenomenology, introduced by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) describes a type of research method directed towards the lived experience, to interpret the *"texts of life"* (Van Manen 1990:4), while transcendental phenomenology or psychological phenomenology, introduced and developed by Husserl, aimed to create the essence of pure consciousness.

Husserl explored how objects and events *"appeared to consciousness since nothing could even be spoken about or witnessed if it did not come through someone's consciousness"* (Giorgi & Giorgi 2003:46). Giorgi and Giorgi (2003:46) go on to explain that consciousness is not to be limited to awareness, but should be understood in a broader sense, which could include preconscious and unconscious processes.

According to Moustakas (1994:27), Husserl's focus was on the discovery of meaning and essences in knowledge, and that Husserl believed that a contrast existed between the *"real and non-real"*. He quotes Husserl as saying: *"Essence provides on the one side a knowledge of the essential nature of the Real, on the other, in respect of the domain left over, knowledge of the essential nature of the non-real (irreal)"* (Moustakas 1994:27). What this means is that the researcher is challenged to describe things as they are, instead of presenting the imagined as possible meaning.

Creswell (1998:52) points out that Husserl emphasized four points in his explorations of consciousness that gave rise to the origins of phenomenology. First is the identification of the fundamental meaning of the experience, its critical, unchanging configuration or essence. Second is the acknowledgement that there is an intentionality of consciousness in which experiences comprise of outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image, and meaning. Third is the analysis of the data based on the *"methodology of reduction"*, the analyzing of particular statements and themes while probing all possible meanings. Fourth, the researcher endeavors to suspend all bias by bracketing his/her own experiences to gain a *"fresh perspective"* of the experience. This is referred to as *"epoche"* (Creswell 1998:52).

Epoche *"is a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment – a way of looking at things that requires we learn to see what stands before our eyes"* (Moustakas 1994:34). Husserl believed that it is important for researchers to put aside any assumptions they may have regarding the phenomenon being researched. He refers to this as bracketing or phenomenological reduction (Crowell 2005:50). This results in the data being epistemological in nature, which means that it provides a description of what is being experienced. The author argues that knowledge is derived from the raised awareness of the phenomenon. Crowell (2005:50) goes on to say that Heidegger, a student of Husserl, disagreed. He believes that the researcher is as much part of

the research as the respondent, and that reliance on previous knowledge plays a role in the interpretation of the phenomenon.

In transcendental phenomenology, the researcher steers away from being influenced by theories since it may lead to a predetermined path, while the absence of theories calls for objectivity through the research process. Heidegger's phenomenology (hermeneutics) on the other hand, has an interpretive aspect which allows the phenomenon to be visible in a way that it can be understood clearly by humans. Heidegger defines hermeneutics as a *"…way of studying all human activities"* (Dreyfus 1994 in McConnell-Henry et al. 2009:7). According to Palmer (1969:13), hermeneutics has three basic functions: *"To express aloud in words, that is, 'to say'; to explain, as in explaining a situation; and to translate, as in the translating of a foreign tongue"*. Together, the three mean *"to interpret"* (Palmer 1969:13).

While some phenomenological scholars propose that a theoretical approach forms a scientific platform based on disciplines, others believe that theory should not be applied to phenomenology (Tavallaei & Abu Talib 2010:575). Phenomenology *"requires a kind of withdrawal from the world and a willingness to lay aside existing theories and beliefs"* (McLeod 2001:37). Although Creswell (2013:15) states that researchers should not be guided by predetermined ideas, frameworks or expectations, he does warn that the role of theory should not be discounted. Creswell goes on to state that when making use of qualitative research, the researcher does not start out with a theory that is to be tested or verified. *"A theory may emerge during the data collection and analysis phase or be used relatively late in the research process as a basis for comparison with other theories"* (Creswell 1994:94).

Heidegger believes that people are intimately immersed in their life-worlds, and calls it 'in-der-Welt-sein', or being-in-the-world (Vandermause & Fleming 2011:369). The question is not whether the person makes the world or the world makes the person, since they coexist

and should therefore be seen in terms of the holistic relationship – being-in-world (Seamon 2000:161). Alfred Schütz (1899-1956) built on the idea that *"the human world comprises various provinces of meaning"* (Vandenberg 1997:7). Husserl's philosophical phenomenology was a point of departure for Schütz, who saw it as *"ways in which ordinary members of society attend to their everyday lives"* (Gubrium & Holstein 2000b:488-489). Schütz's aim was to take the phenomenological perspective and to apply it to the social world (Throop & Murphy 2002:194).

Schütz divides modes of thought into two types: common sense and scientific, where common sense is that which subjective actors use to experience the lived world, and the latter is what social scientists use to examine those actors in the world. Schütz argues that all knowledge involves constructs – abstractions, generalizations, formalizations, and idealizations specific to respective levels of thought. All knowledge requires a *"medium of interpretation"* between it and the world it occurs in (Throop & Murphy 2002:194). Schütz goes on to state that people all have unique biographies, or knowledge gained through personal experience that allows one to interpret particular events in one's life. This knowledge is acquired by interaction with other people in society, which influences the way in which one interprets world experiences. Everyday experiences are taken for granted. According to Schütz this stems *from "historical and socially distributed conditions of knowledge that influence our experience of the world"*, from which we draw the knowledge we use to interpret social facts (Throop & Murphy 2002:196).

Although a great number of our personal, social, and cultural patterns that respond to perceptual, sensory, and conceptual stimuli are habitual, it does not mean that people who respond to habitual patterns are not conscious of these responses as they occur. Phenomenology provides an accurate methodology through which researchers can study the workings of consciousness in its totality in terms of its operations and structures, since it

gives both descriptive and genetic accounts of experience (Throop & Murphy 2002:201). For this reason I will briefly look at the concept *"consciousness"*.

4.4.1 Consciousness

Husserl argues that phenomenology needs to show what consciousness *'is'*, what it *'means'* by way of actions, and how it *'intends'* the objective (Rodgers 1983:22). Rodgers (1983:22) goes on to state that Husserl felt that consciousness was the contact with transcendent objects, as well as with intrinsic objects, and that consciousness was always directed towards objects.

Phenomenologists also distinguish between the *'real'* and the *'meant-as-real'*, but stipulate that consciousness is our only way of accessing what is *'real'* to us. The consciousness referred to here is found in the world as we know it – our world. In our world one does not only find the *"meant-as-real but also the meant-as-unreal, meant-as-possible, meant-as-impossible, and whatever else is conceivable"* (Rodgers 1983:22). Phenomenology puts emphasis on the common-sense world as we know and experience it. Intentionality and life-world are two concepts that form part of the basis of phenomenology as research methodology in the human sciences.

4.4.2 Intentionality

Giorgi (1997:237) defines intentionality, in Husserlian terms, as *"the essential feature of consciousness"*, where the act of consciousness *"is always directed to an object that is not itself consciousness, although it could be, as in reflective acts. Humans interpret objects as such. When a part of a familiar object is being observed, we intuitively see the whole object. Husserl labeled this instinctive knowing of something as "a clear intuiting"*. Giorgi (1997:237) believes it can also be interpreted as the perception or experiencing of an object or phenomena.

Intentionality in phenomenology is deemed as important since the purpose of phenomenology is to understand how human beings perceive or experience objects or phenomena in the world. Intentionality is connected to the life-world because it impacts on objects, people, and phenomena that present itself in the world (Gibson & Haynes 2003:182). Intentionality entails both *'consciousness of objects'* and *'objects of consciousness'*. When the focus is on consciousness of an object, the emphasis is on the *'noesis'* of an act of consciousness; when the focus is on the object of consciousness, the emphasis is on the *'noema'* of the act, where the noesis is the acting-toward (the intending) and the noema the acted-toward (the intended). Together they constitute every intentional act (Rodgers 1983:23), which leads to meaningful experience.

Building on Husserl's analysis of intentionality, Heidegger argues that humans cannot be separated from the world that they are a part of. He had a concern with the way the practical involvement of humans in their environment had been emphasized. He feels that humans are not mere spectators in their world, but rather form part of it; and that the world is not a collection of objects or things, but rather an interconnected web of functional associations between practical *'tools'* or *'equipment'* (Overgaard & Zahavi 2009:3). Rather than viewing individuals and society (or subjectivity and sociality) as separate entities, phenomenology attempts to fuse them together. As part of the ongoing debate concerning the relation between science and experience, phenomenologists underline the importance of the life-world (Overgaard & Zahavi 2009:3). In the next section I elaborate on the concept *"life-world"*.

4.4.3 Life-world

From a phenomenological point of view, life-world refers to *"the world of the shared ongoing flow of experience from which we constitute objects and abstract conceptions"* (Coetzee 2001:124), in other words, *"the world in which we are already living"* (Rodgers 1983:49). The life-world includes all aspects of life – routine or unpredictable. Regardless

whether the experience is ordinary or bizarre, the life-world in which this experience takes place is always present in the background. This is because people are not consciously aware of their experiences in the life-world. These are experiences that merely happen. People do not consciously examine how they happen, or whether they could happen differently, or if they form part of a larger experiential structure (Seamon 2000:162). To build on existing knowledge, researchers study the way in which humans experience phenomena in the life-world in their natural environment (Gibson & Haynes 2003:183).

According to Rodgers (1983:50), there are three elements of the life-world that are of sociological significance: humans take the life-world for granted, the life-world is social, and the life-world is a *"paramount reality"* which is deemed *"necessary for all human experience, communication, and activity"*. Much of what people take for granted, has a direct impact on the social aspect of the life-world since it regulates daily life and provides assumptions of everyday knowledge. Knowledge is taken for granted because humans have a stock of knowledge *'on hand'* and a stock of knowledge *'at hand'*. As we gain knowledge with experience, knowledge *'at hand'* becomes knowledge *'on hand'*, which means that the stock of knowledge focuses on the stock of knowledge *'on hand'* with its essential elements and habitual knowledge used to understand the world we live in (Rodgers 1983:55).

The essential elements include the *"unchangeable spatial, temporal, and social structures of experience"*, while habitual knowledge entails skills, useful knowledge, and knowledge of practices of daily living. Essential elements are elements that cannot be questioned, altered, or modified. They are permanently present and form the basis for conscious existence. Habitual or routine knowledge is knowledge gained by repetition or with relative difficulty, such as learning a new language. Once habitualized, such knowledge is always *'on hand'* to assist in all individual experiences (Rodgers 1983:56).

4.5　Existential sociology

In addition to phenomenology, this project also uses principles of existential sociology as part of the theoretical framework. Existentialism is perceived as a philosophy as well as something other than philosophy. It is perceived from a philosophical perspective because it addresses questions and issues within philosophy as discipline by means of well-developed arguments and standpoints. It is perceived as something other than a philosophical perspective because it is "a sensibility, a way of life, a passion for living, an orientation to the flux and emergence of actual lived experience" (Kotarba 2009:141). For this reason, it makes sense to use aspects of existential sociology when researching a topic such as the experience of aging.

Existential sociology can be defined as *"the study of human experience-in-the-world (or existence) in all its forms"* (Douglas and Johnson 1977 in Kotarba 2009:140). Existential thinking opposes the idea that human actions can be understood through scientific methods alone. The approach adopts the understanding that a person can increase self-awareness, which allows opportunities for freedom. Freedom however, does not mean that one has no responsibilities. Existentialism proposes that while one may be free, one is simultaneously responsible for one's being (Jones 1998:57), which allows one the freedom to create one's own reality (Spillers 2007:192).

Existential sociologists view human beings as not merely being rational or symbolic, or as beings that cooperate through interlinking actions. Rather, they advocate that humans are emotional and irrational beings, and that their actions are based on feelings and moods (Adler et al. 1987:223). They see humans as social actors who face and attempt to overcome everyday life predicaments. People look to others to find meanings to complement their own deep feelings that assist in dealing with these predicaments. The actor manages meanings by

entrenching them in stories that form the *"substance of social life"* (Kotarba 2009:151). At the same time, existential sociologists view society as intricate and multicultural, divided by power struggles between various groups (Adler et al. 1987:223). Since existentialism addresses diverse perspectives, and has had an influence on all aspects of human life and society, it is no surprise that existentialists have aligned themselves within a full range of human values or opinions, ranging from fundamental Christianity to atheism, or from communism to democracy (Kotarba 2009:149).

4.6   Reflexive sociology

Another distinctive branch of sociology, that is useful when researching the experience of aging, reflexive sociology, involves the *"self-critical problematization of social science"* (Serban 2011:251). The author goes on to state that for Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), reflexivity meant that one focuses on one's practices instead of the theories. What this means was that those who create theory have an abstract logic that is different from the practical logic of those who live in the social world. Older women need to be heard and have their views accurately portrayed. A qualitative narrative research approach attempts this, since the older women's stories form a central focus of this study.

Reflexivity is seen as a social enquiry that allows sociologists to create the hegemony within their own disciplines. It enables them to study individuals in a social setting dominated by cultural capital. Those who owned social capital were the masters of their own destiny while the rest in that discipline followed (St. Clair et al. 2005:138). Humans are creatures of habit who adhere to routines and who lived episodic lives. Although Bourdieu agrees with them, he argues that interaction takes place between individuals who share the same social practices; a mindset of dispositions that guide social interactions. Bourdieu prefers the word *'habitus'* (made up of dispositions, including habits, beliefs, values, etc.) (Morberg et al. 2012:355),

rather than *'habit'* since he proposes that habitus has a deeper technical meaning (St. Clair et al. 2005:143).

Throop and Murphy (2002:186) define habitus as *"an internalized structure or set of structures (derived from pre-existing external structures) that determine how an individual acts in and reacts to the world"*. People involve themselves by doing things (opus operatum – the creating of products, and acts of behavior – a practice that produces structures that are concrete) and it is only when they employ a different way of thinking (modus operandi – the theoretical mode of thinking about practice – a mode that produces structures that are abstract), that one begins to understand the nature of praxis. Habitus is derived from individual or collective experiences of the past, and is a product of history. These experiences produce individual or collective practices (Morberg et al. 2012:356), and these routines go on to create changing patterns of behavior that reproduce themselves (St. Clair et al. 2005:143). The habitus is a preference to see, talk, do or work in a designated manner, and shapes what is understood to be rational (Leander 2009:7).

Serban (2011:249) describes habitus as an abstract entity *"within a bodily and a spiritual dimension"*, which forms the basis of individual identity. In other words, the true knowledge of individual identity is the self-understanding of one's own habitus. Leander (2009:6) defines habitus as the habitual, taken for granted way of thinking and acting, and is a structured way of shaping understandings, outlooks, conduct and the body. Habitus is formed through the accrued experience of people in different fields, and shapes all behavior and thinking.

In addition to the concept *"habitus"* Bourdieu uses also the concept *"field"* to describe the way in which people experience reality. A *'field'* on the other hand, is the *"sphere in which agents compete for a value that all involved agree on is worth struggling over"* (Serban

2011:250). A field comprises of a *"set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power, while habitus consists of a set of historical relations 'deposited' within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation, and action"* (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:16). Leander (2009:3) views a field as an area or domain of social interactions where each field develops its own distinctive logic vital for understanding a particular aspect of social life. The logic and rules of the game in a particular area has an impact on everything in this area, including the actors in the field. Fields *"make up the social contexts from which habits and understandings are internalized"* (Leander 2009:6), and is simultaneously a *"space of conflict and competition"* (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:17).

Bourdieu's concepts of *'habitus'* and *'field'* are often used in the social sciences to analyze power relations. The way people perceive the world and how they live it, is the key to all power relations. It emphasizes things people attach meaning to (for example, money, possessions, culture, or relationships). It also has an influence on the way people or institutions view hierarchies and how they influence behavior. Symbolic power forms the basis in these understandings. Field and habitus is one possible way to analyze these understandings and symbolic power, where the *'rules of the game'* of a field and the dispositions (habitus) of those involved in that field help to understand the analysis of power relations and the placing of symbolic power (Leander 2009:2). For this reason Bourdieu's conceptual contribution is valuable when researching the experience of aging.

4.7 An interpretive phenomenological methodology

In social constructivism (also known as interpretivism), people seek understanding of the world they live in. Subjective meanings of their experiences are developed, which are directed at certain objects or things. Since these views are varied and multiple, researchers

seek out the complexity of views instead of reducing the meanings into a few categories or ideas. Constructivists thus address the processes of interaction between people by focusing on specific contexts in which people live, which allows the researcher to understand the environmental settings of the participant. The researcher would interpret what is found; an interpretation based on their own experience or background (Creswell 2013:25). The constructivist worldview in which people describe their experiences manifests itself in phenomenological studies. An interpretive phenomenological methodology is well-suited for researching the experience of aging.

Interpretive phenomenology allows the researcher to explore in detail how humans give meaning to their personal and social worlds, whereby people have been commissioned as active representatives in their own lives (Hendricks 1996:141). It provides a platform for understanding and interpreting aging, as experienced by English speaking older women in Bloemfontein. The interpretive approach used in this study was deemed as an approach well suited to give older women a voice, since they were telling their own narrative form of their experience. Researchers making use of phenomenology, often use personal narratives in an attempt to understand the lived experience of the storytellers, attempting to achieve an empathetic understanding of those experiences. The focus would be on the respondent telling the story, not just the story (Bernard & Ryan 2010:248).

4.8   Narrative inquiry

The way in which people see themselves, which includes interrelated opinions about their characteristics, capabilities, or self-concepts, has wide and significant implications in terms of individual functioning. It is argued that elements such as positivity, consistency, and clarity are essential for maintaining well-being. This is because people interpret their past and present experiences based on what they believe to be true about them (Rice & Pasupathi

2010:479). Narrative inquiry assists us to make sense of life as we age, by looking for coherence, a story line, themes, and meaning. In this study, each narrative emerges from the stories told by the research participants. Individually and collectively they highlight the generational identity and the cultural and social factors that impact on this identity.

William Randall (2010:26) argues that it is the inside, not the outside, which is the primary focus from a narrative perspective. Biographical aging, not biological aging forms the basis for understanding humans as meaning-making, storytelling beings, where meaning is derived from experience. Randall (2010:26) goes on to state that living a life, which incorporates the aging experience, is about "composing a life". The ongoing composition of our lives becomes the story of our lives. Bruner (2004:691) argues that the constructivist believes that stories are constructed in one's head.

From a narrative perspective, the way people construct stories of their experiences are connected to the way in which they see themselves. Rice & Pasupathi (2010:480) believe that self-concept development is bi-directional and reciprocal. It has an influence on the narrative construction of experiences, and that narrative constructions strengthen or change self-conceptions. Bruner (2004:692) confirms that self-concept development is bi-directional by saying that the *"mimesis between life so-called and narrative is a two-way affair"*, where narrative imitates life, and life imitates narrative. Narrative is thus a "selective achievement of memory recall" that describes one's life in an interpretive way (Bruner 2004:693). Bruner (2004:698) talks of two landscapes that form part of a single narrative – one of action, in which events unfold; the other of consciousness, referring to the inner worlds of the characters involved in the action. In other words, landscapes could be understood by what people do and the internal processes that accompany those actions. *"They hope, are doubting and confused, wonder about appearance and reality"* (Bruner 2004:698). The stories people tell of their lives are told, as Bruner coins it, *"from a perspectival narrative language"*. The

manner, in which the research participants tell their stories, sheds light on who they are, and how they came to be who they are. According to Coleman (1993:74) the *"life story"* approach, in which older women construct their own life stories, has changed the focus from being subjects of research to being informants of their own lives.

Barbara Czarniawska (2004:17) defines narratives as a qualitative method in which the spoken or written text gives an *"account of an event/action or series of events/actions"*, which are chronologically connected. Narratives make use of stories to describe human experiences and actions (Oliver 1998:245). It describes events, and how people experience them, or it could describe processes step by step (Rubin & Rubin 1995:24). Narratives are accounts of events that are told to someone else. Phelan (2005:18) describes it as: *"Somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened"*. People often construct their experiences in the narrative form, in an everyday setting (Rice & Pasupathi 2010:480). Jean-Paul Sartre (in Bruner 2004:699) remarks that *"a man is always a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his own stories and those of other people, he sees everything that happens to him in terms of these stories and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it"*. It can be seen as a conversation that has a structure and a purpose that is co-produced through the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee (Gubrium & Holstein 2002:12). The experience of aging as told by the older women in this study is an example of the use of narratives, within a qualitative, interpretive approach.

Although the term narrative and story is used interchangeably, stories often refer to the presumed sequence of events, while narratives are usually referring to the actual representation of the events, and are mostly told by someone. However, without a story, there is no narrative. According to Hyvärinen (2009:2), in the study of human experience, narratives portray someone who is "sensing" the world. In this study the *"sensing"* persons would be the older women, whose voices represent their experiences.

People give meaning to their lives by telling their stories, and a narrative is how people interpret meaning from life experiences. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990:2), *"people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience... Life narratives are the context for meaning making"*. Oliver (1998:247) believes that it is the meaning of our experiences, not the basic ontological structure of objects, which creates the reality we respond to.

Although some theorists believe that the construction of reality occurs through stories that are told, Bruner (1994:36) argues that a life is not *"how it was"*, rather, it is how it is interpreted and retold. Life therefore becomes and can be described as a continuous narrative. John Creswell (2013:71) sets out elements of narratives that define its boundaries:

- Firstly, stories are collected from individuals about their lived experiences.

- These narrative stories are individual experiences that highlight individual identities and how the research participants view themselves.

- Although narrative stories are gathered in many forms, the researcher makes use of personal interviews as primary form of data collection.

- The stories being told are often not told chronologically. They may include events about the research participant's past, present or future. During the analysis stage, the researcher may arrange these stories to follow chronologically.

- Narrative stories can be analyzed in various ways. It can be analyzed thematically (about what is being said); structurally (the nature of the telling of the story); or dialogic (who the story is directed toward).

- Stories often contain *"turning points"* (discussed in 2.4), such as specific tensions or interruptions that are focused on by the researcher.

- Narrative stories are told within specific places or situations, which influences the importance of the context in which the stories are being *"re-storied"* by the researcher.

Benwell and Stoke (2006:138) note that narrative stories involve the *"doing"* of identity. Since we are able to tell different stories, different versions of the self can be constructed. This would suggest that the cultural resources that older women use when describing their lives, and "doing identity", are done with some degree of reflexivity. Storytellers draw on various aging identities in order to accomplish an ontological narrative to understand the concept of aging, and how women make the most of life in their later years. One way is to make use of big and small stories when constructing a narrative. I briefly touch on this in the next section.

4.9 Big stories, small stories

To examine how identity is narratively accomplished, the difference between a *"big story"* and *"small story"* approach is outlined. Within a *"big story"* approach, the focus is on the biographical narrative content of the story such as personal, past experiences. It asks for the recollection on specific episodes that have shaped the lives of older women or on their lives as a whole, which connects events into episodes, or episodes into a life story. Georgakopoulou (2006:122) suggests that the analysis of big stories is often utilized to present the bigger picture of one's life.

"Small stories" on the other hand, refer to stories within everyday settings, such as mundane things and everyday occurrences. Georgakopoulou (2006:123) refers to such settings as *"fleeting moments of narrative orientation to the world"*. Small stories capture events that happened recently – this morning; last night – or events that are unfolding. It therefore reworks portions of experience that had just happened with the need to share seemingly

uninteresting tidbits. It could even be about small incidents that back up or elaborate on facts pointed out in an ongoing conversation (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008:381).

It may occur that small stories are often overlooked within narrative research because they may bear no particular importance. The importance of small stories lies in the fact that they could reveal how older women convey their sense of self and identity. For Dan McAdams (2006:643) *"identity is a life story"*. It can be likened to a novel in the making that contains countless smaller stories with *"countless themes and subplots coursing through it"* (Randall 2010:27). Freeman (2006:136) believes that big and small stories complement each other, and when used in combination to understand the lived experience of older women, they allow for an integrative direction for narrative enquiry.

The meaning of lived experiences is best described by the individuals who have experienced it. One way to gain a greater understanding about the experiences of aging is by studying theories of aging. According to Coleman (1993:100) theories provide a way of thinking about the world, and about human behavior and society in the way that it satisfies the need for a model which fits our experience of reality. Theories provide a framework in which people can understand their experiences. A lack of theory and norms can be detrimental when interpreting an older person's behavior since it leads to *"stereotypes and prejudices about deterioration, self-absorption and rigidity of old age"*. On the other hand, rigid adherence to a theory does not allow for individual differences and may lead to generalizations that dictate how older people should behave (Coleman 1993:101).

This chapter introduced the epistemological, ontological and methodological approach that lays the theoretical foundation for the manner in which this study was conducted. I outlined the importance of phenomenology, existential and reflexive sociology, and the use of narrative inquiry to conceptualize and interpret this study. Chapter 5 is a detailed methodical

framework that deals with the qualitative inquiry process. In this chapter, I address the data collection, the sampling strategy, as well as the analysis process and the important aspect of ethical considerations. I attempt to demonstrate how I put into practice the philosophical and theoretical framework used in the previous chapter.

CHAPTER 5

5   A methodological account

As seen in the previous chapter, phenomenological research focuses on the life-world. This section will mainly undertake to explain aspects of the approach used to enter the life-world. Since this study of the aging experience of English speaking women in Bloemfontein is grounded in Interpretivism, which focuses on a non-exploitative relationship between the researcher and research participants, the study is based on collaboration, cooperation, and mutual respect. Van Manen (1990:61) argues that the aim of interpretive research is to create dialogue through engaged reasoning in the immediacy of the research participants' world in order to capture the lived experience. I therefore conduct this study within a context that enables an interpretive understanding of the environment in which the research participants live and manage their lives.

5.1   Human and ethical considerations

I made every attempt to protect the basic human rights of the research participants. Participants were assured of confidentiality. No identifying information was annotated on the identifying labels of the audio recordings or transcriptions of the interviews. A pseudonym was allocated to each research participant, which is used in the analysis, narrative description, and interpretation of the data in the research. I was the only person who had access to the transcripts, and names were removed from the copies after the information was coded. Only I, the researcher, was able to identify the participants. The digital recordings of the interviews were erased upon completion of the research, and the written research report and findings do not contain the actual names of the research participants. The purpose of the study was explained and written consent was obtained from each participant (Appendix A). Each participant had the choice to withdraw from the study at any stage of the interview.

Older women live independent lives and are competent to make decisions whether or not to partake in research. Since they would be treated the same way that any other competent adult would be treated as far as research is concerned, the ethical issues that arise would be the same. I was however aware that older people in general are more likely to suffer from various physical or mental impairments that may affect their competence to consent to research (Gilhooly 2002:211). It is therefore essential to bear in mind that this is not merely a research study; it is a study that deals with people's lives. It thus needs to be handled with care, dignity and respect.

Valid consent forms an essential part of the ethical practice of social science because competent adults are assumed to be free to refuse to take part in research should they feel uncomfortable or at risk. I identified myself to the research participants who took part in this study, thereby also identifying my association with the University of the Free State, including my status as student and researcher. All participants received information (Appendix A) necessary to participate with the needed full consent.

Mary Gilhooly (2002:212) highlights four guiding ethical principles that are applicable to the practice of research:

- Non-maleficence – do no harm.

- Beneficence – do positive good.

- Justice – treat people fairly.

- Autonomy – have respect for people.

As far as possible, no deception tactics or misinformation was deployed to gather data. Such methods are seen as a risk that could have a negative impact on the self-esteem and dignity of the older women in this study. There are a number of derivative moral rules, such as informed consent, privacy, anonymity and confidentiality that are to be taken in consideration in

research. Anonymity means that no information can be traced back to the research participant in any way. The intimate nature of qualitative interviews often means that participants reveal information that they are not directly questioned about, such as information about their own lives or of family. Confidentiality is important in that the researcher has an implied *'contract'* with the research participant. Information is given to the researcher by the participant with the understanding that it will not be divulged to others. If researchers do not keep such information confidential, it will become increasingly more difficult to get people who would be willing to take part in research studies (Gilhooly 2002:220).

5.2   Sampling strategy

In this study of the experience of aging, I propose to use a purposive sampling approach. Purposive sampling refers to conscious selection of participants for this study (Burns & Grove 1998:750). This method of sampling selects individuals for study participation based on their particular knowledge of a phenomenon, for the purpose of sharing such knowledge. Sampling refers to the process of selecting participants that form part of the study. In qualitative research, participant involvement is based on their first-hand experience of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell 1998:22). Older women between the ages of 65 and 75 were selected as potential participants if they lived in Bloemfontein, and were able to express themselves in their mother-tongue.

Creswell (2013:154) outlines three considerations when applying purposive sampling in qualitative research. They are the decision as to whom to select as participants for the study; the specific sampling strategy; and size of the sample size to be studied. In a narrative study, participants need to have a story to tell regarding their lived experiences. In a study where phenomenology forms the basis of the study, criterion sampling, a more narrow sampling strategy was utilized. Palys (2008:698) argues that criterion sampling involves *"searching for*

cases or individuals who meet a certain criterion". Older women in this study fit the criteria of people who have experienced the phenomenon of aging (Creswell 2013:155).

I also make use of elements of a snowball sampling approach - also known as chain referral sampling – which falls in the purposive sampling category. This method is used where participants participating in the study make use of their social networks to refer the researcher to other potential participants who could make a meaningful contribution to the study. Participants are recruited one at a time, which allows for the data to be analysed throughout the research process.

The setting of this study is the homes of the proposed research participants, which includes their own residences, or care facilities in which they reside. I felt that they would feel more at ease within their own familiar living space, in which they could partake in dialogical engagement and reminiscences.

5.3   Data collection: in-depth interviews

Qualitative data collection is mostly unstructured and flexible, and in the case of this project is based on the verbatim capturing of dialogical data or observable characteristics and yielding data that usually does not take a numerical form. It usually includes aspects related to ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology.

Phenomenology has its roots in philosophy and is concerned with the lived experience as perceived in this case, by older women. It was assumed that the ontology of the aging experience would manifest itself in the stories about everyday life (Wright-St Clair et al. 2011:90). In phenomenological research, the number of research participants is mostly limited because of the richness of the data obtained, as well as the *"extent to which the phenomenon is explored in the interview"* (Drew 1989:431).

The in-depth interviews were the primary source of data collection. Data gathering is the accurate, methodical gathering of information (Burns & Grove 2003:373). This study uses methods such as interviews and narratives to gather the information required. Kvale (1996:30) describes a qualitative interview *as "obtaining descriptions of the lived world of the interviewees with respect to interpretations of the meaning of the described phenomena".* Kvale (1996:4) makes use of two metaphors to characterize the interview process; that of miner and of traveller, where the traveller metaphor appears to resonate with this study. *"The interviewer-traveller wanders through the landscape and enters into conversations with people encountered...asks questions that lead subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world"* (Kvale 1996:4). The interviews were conducted in the homes of the research participants.

A starting point for selection was an informal consultation with colleagues, friends and acquaintances who knew older women in this age category, who in turn referred me to other women in this age category. The next step was to contact potential research participants, requesting an interview and to explain the procedures that would be followed to give them the opportunity to consent to or to decline participation. One of the potential participants declined did not see her way clear to become involved in this project. During the first meeting I gave each participant a copy of a consent form (Appendix 1), in which I outlined the procedures mentioned in the initial telephone conversation with them.

Six initial interviews were conducted in which the participants were encouraged to tell their stories within a conversational mode of dialogue. Follow-up interviews were conducted to explore specific points of interest that required probing beyond the story's surface. The women interviewed were encouraged to ask any questions they had during the interview. This led to the engagement in the creation of meaning from the information that emerged during

the interview process. My interpretation of that information facilitates the construction of their stories.

A disadvantage of in-depth interviewing is that it tends to reduce comparability of interviews within a study, but it must be taken into consideration that the sample of six older women was not intended to provide statistical generalizations. Instead, the purpose was to gain insightful, holistic explanations of how ordinary older women lived ordinary lives.

To transform the older women's experience of aging into language, the proposed interviews were recorded by means of a digital recording device, which allowed me to concentrate on listening to the research participant during the interviews. The recordings were transcribed shortly after conducting the interviews to ensure the inclusion of verbal and non-verbal cues, and to ensure that sentiments and emotions contained in the interviews were accurately captured.

Participation was voluntary and confidential. Participants were informed of this prior to data collection. They were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage should they wish not to continue with the narrative interviews. To ensure that participants fully understood the implications of participation and were aware of their rights in the research process, it was requested that they sign a letter of consent (Annexure A). This consent indicated their willingness to participate in this study as well as the right to withdraw from the research study at any stage without any ramifications.

I generated a tentative interview schedule that served as a prompting device (Annexure B). Polit and Hungler (1995:273) warn that although unstructured interviews are seen as being conversational, it should not be approached in a casual manner. Therefore, in advance, thoughts and purposeful preparations are to be made before starting with the interview. Taylor and Bogdan (1984:92) define an interview schedule as a list of general ideas on a

particular topic that need to be covered. It was not necessarily a structured format; it was used to assist me in the focus on the phenomenon being studied. Draft questions were formulated to guide me in the study, and could be changed at any stage to address new areas of focus.

Qualitative interviewing is a way of understanding experiences of others and reconstructing events in which the researcher or interviewer was not a part of. It is an intentional way of learning about the feelings, thoughts and experiences of those being interviewed. The aim of unstructured interviews are to enter the world of the person being interviewed as well as to understand their world from a theoretical perspective that is grounded in behaviours, languages, definitions, attitudes and feelings of those who are being interviewed (De Vos 2002:302). Johnson (2002:106) agrees by stating that interviews *"explore the contextual boundaries of the experience or perception, and uncover what is usually hidden from ordinary view or reflection"*. Although the qualitative interview is guided by the researcher, researcher reflexivity is a key component that determines the success of the interview (Rubin & Rubin 1995:44).

Researcher reflexivity concerns those involved in research where there is awareness of the impact of their own life experiences and backgrounds on the manner they interpret events, and on the effects of their research on participants in their study (Fine et al. 2000:109). The establishment of a bond with participants to share their personal thoughts, experiences and feelings for the researcher's own ends brings with it an inherent responsibility because of the vulnerability of participants in terms of, amongst others, their age, health, social networks and perceived social status (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006:317).

A qualitative research approach attempts to give older women a voice, allowing them to portray their views in their own words. To elicit information on the meaning of aging, I pursued *"avenues of enquiry"* as opposed to rigid survey questions. Although questions were

compiled that were relevant to the topic being studied, which included themes such as significant people and events, expectations for later life, social network and leisure time activities, health status, life satisfaction, attitude towards aging, religion, financial matters and employment history, the research participants were encouraged to reflect, in detail, on events they had experienced in their worlds, in their own terms (Rubin & Rubin 1995:1). Holstein and Gubrium (2004:140) state that during interviews, research participants are seen as individuals full of reflections, opinions, and experiences. These factors assisted to establish meaning about the phenomenon being discussed. At the time of the interview I arranged for returning for a second conversation for clarity and additional information.

My research focus is aging as experienced by older women, where the aim is to interpret the first hand lived experiences of a group of women between 65 and 75 years of age. To address this phenomenon, older women's experiences and reflections are gathered by means of interviews. The interview process is all-embracing because the aim is not to understand the *"subjective experiences"* of a participant; it is to understand the *"human experience"* of the phenomenon being studied (Van Manen 1990:62).

Interviews are not translations of objective facts. It is a selection of mutually constructed social events from which data is generated. Interviews are conversational in nature (Van Manen 1990:54). In Bernstein's (1983:2) view*: "A conversation which is not to be confused with idle chatter, or a violent babble of competing voices, is an extended and open dialogue which presupposes a background of intersubjective agreements and a tacit sense of relevance"*. As in a conversation, questions and answers follow each other in a logical way as the conversation progresses. I listen to each answer or story and determine the next question based on what is being said. The focus is on key words and ideas, as well as on nonverbal cues that indicate emphasis, omissions, and emotional tones that give shape to the worlds of the research respondent (Rubin & Rubin 1995:7).

Van Manen (1990:66) argues that interviewing, from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, serves a dual purpose. First it is a *"means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon"*, and secondly, it serves as a *"vehicle to develop a conversational relation"* with a participant or group of participants (in this case, elderly women) about the meaning of their experience. Interviews resemble the natural storytelling setting. I am present and listen to the stories being told. Riessman (2008:5) narrowly defines a narrative as a story that has a plot – that is *"topically centred and temporarily organized"*. From a broader view, narratives could include life stories that involve the use of documents, interviews, observations, or a series of interviews and conversations.

Narratives relate events or present stages of a social process in a step by step manner, while stories communicate a moral, broad message, or a set of central beliefs. The underlying importance of stories is that they can convey a point that the participant otherwise feels uncomfortable to convey directly, thereby becoming a subtle way *"of communicating or deepening the level of discussion or redirecting the subject"* (Rubin & Rubin 1995:25-26).

Ellis and Bochner (2000:744) define narrative inquiry as *"stories that create the effect of reality, showing characters imbedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle, [...] , trying to preserve or restore the continuity and coherence of life's unity in the face of unexpected blows of fate that call one's meanings and values into question"*. Since narratives are based on stories about the past, it is easy to see why critics view it as uncertain or vague, or even as romantic constructions unworthy of being classified as part of social science. Ellis and Bochner (2000:745) argue that narratives are truths that seek to keep the past alive in the present. The stories that are told show that things that use to have meaning or significance in the past are unfinished, uncertain, and open to change according to *"contingencies of our*

present life circumstances, the present from which we narrate". Unlike normal conversations where the topics can drift without a goal, the discussion is guided during an interview, leading it through stages, and asking specific questions that encourage the participants to answer in depth and in length (Rubin & Rubin 1995:124).

At first, I the interviewer, and interviewee were strangers to each other, and the person being interviewed may have feelings of uncertainty, or may feel self-conscious. It is thus of great importance that I project myself in a way that puts the participant at ease during the interview. Since these interviews involve women who are older in age, interview schedules need to be negotiated well in advance due to specific needs and conditions anticipated, such as resting times and specific timetables that may be followed by persons living in care facilities. Allowance also needs to be made to accommodate factors such as fatigue that can possibly be experienced during data collection in the interview.

When soliciting research participants for the study, I did not offer incentives for participation. To affirm the importance of each research participant used in the study, I provided a pot plant as token of appreciation during the first interview. With the second interview, a monetary amount of R150.00 was given to participants as token of appreciation. It was made clear that this was not a form of payment. The practical aspects of the research were explained to the research participants, such as the reason for the use of a recording device, and the approximate time that would be devoted to the interview. The establishment of a cordial atmosphere is vital to assist the participant in feeling secure and confident to speak freely (De Vos 2002:293). Interviews were usually initiated with broad or general questioning. No questions were deliberately formulated; they developed spontaneously during the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee (Fontana & Fray 1994:368). The aim of questioning was to encourage the research participant to continue talking. The participant was encouraged

to elaborate on any particular aspect that I may have needed clarity on, or to follow up on cues during the interview in order to capture the *"true"* meaning of a phenomenon.

To capture the true meaning of the reality concerning the phenomenon being studied, I made use of probes. Probing encourages the participant to render more information. Probes should be neutral to avoid biased responses from the participant. Specific probing techniques include open-ended questions, tracking, clarification, and reflective summary. An open-ended question encourages the research participant to elaborate on a point of interest, and gives the participant the opportunity to express their feelings (De Vos 2002:293) about their own lives and experiences in their own words.

Interviews can be likened to a needle tracking the grooves of a record. The researcher shows a keen interest and encourages the research participant to speak by following the content and meaning of their verbal and non-verbal conversation. Clarification is a key component to ensure that there is no misunderstanding in the conversation. A reflective summary can further enhance the clarity needed by the researcher on various aspects under discussion when sections of the interview are repeated in the words or opinions of the participant (De Vos 2002:294).

Field notes were taken during the interview to record body language or any contributing factors that could not be captured on the recordings, but Sacks (in Silverman 2006:161) argues that field notes or recollections of interviews should not be relied on too heavily. Recordings of the natural occurring conversations provide data that allows the researcher to analyse how the research participants construct their social worlds (Silverman 2006:160). Audio recordings allow the researcher to focus on the actual details of the conversation.

Silverman (Silverman 2006:162) goes on to state that audio recordings and transcripts have three clear advantages over other forms of qualitative data: Recordings are a public record;

the recordings can be replayed to ensure the conversations are transcribed verbatim; and audio recordings preserve sequences of speech. Firstly, the audio recordings of the interviews held with participants serve as public record and is available to the scientific community, whereas field notes are not. The second advantage is that audio recordings can be replayed to improve transcripts and to ensure accuracy of the transcripts. The third advantage is that it allows the researcher to inspect sequences within the speech to assist in making sense of the conversation. The audio recordings and transcripts thus preserve sequences of speech (Silverman 2006:162).

According to Bamberg (2012:84) transcripts attempt to manage three general and complex tasks: they render reality, they transform reality, and they highlight and communicate what is considered relevant about the said reality to the reader. After careful analysis of the transcripts made of the recorded conversations between the research participants and myself about the participant's views of their aging experience, certain themes were highlighted. Although each participant's transcript was analyzed separately in an attempt to unpack a *"thick"* description of the individual accounts of each participant's view of their aging experience, a comparative analysis between common themes were made, that were linked to the literature on older women's experiences of aging. The aim of the comparative analysis was not to simplify or generalize the findings to a larger population. Instead, my aim was to create a greater understanding of older women's aging experiences through the shared themes by including multiple voices and the expert voices from the literature.

5.4 Data analysis

Data analysis is a means of reducing and organizing data to produce findings that require interpretation by the researcher (Burns & Grove 2003:479), and is perceived as being a challenging and creative process characterized by the intimate relationship that was formed

between the researcher, participant, and the data generated (De Vos 2002:339). Neuman (1997:426) says data analysis is a process in which patterns in data are identified which are then interpreted *"in terms of a social theory or the setting in which it occurred"*.

Analysis of data involves the identification of important features and the description of the interrelations among them. The descriptive stage is the first phase in which the researcher familiarizes her-/himself with the data. The thorough and comprehensive descriptions of the phenomenon being studied are referred to as *"thick"* description. *"Thick"* description is an attempt to accurately describe and interpret social actions within the appropriate context in which the social action takes place. It captures the thoughts, emotions, and social interaction of observed participants in their natural environment (Ponterotto, 2006:544). *"Thick"* description includes the context of the actions, the objectives of the actor, and the method in which the actions are entrenched. The purpose of qualitative analysis is therefore to provide a thorough description in each of these areas (Dey 2005:32).

Reflexivity, bracketing and intuiting was used to exclude any preconceived ideas regarding the phenomenon being studied. In this study, I transcribed the recorded interview verbatim to include pauses, exclamations, laughter, etc. Specific attention was paid to the silent, unspoken gestures that get transmitted through emotions, expressions and gestures that form part of the narrative situation. In the process of narrative analysis, the researcher conceptualizes the phenomenon on hand, which includes the interpretation of unspoken meanings which could assist the researcher to dig deeper in order to extract data that was not initially offered by the research participant. The aim of phenomenological analysis is to identify the crux of the phenomenon being studied based on the data attained and how the data is presented. The researcher listens, compares and contrasts descriptions of the phenomenon being studied. This allows for the identification of recurring themes and interrelationships (Brink & Wood 1998:20).

5.4.1 Qualitative phenomenological data analysis

In phenomenological research, the analysis commences as the first data is collected since the gathering and analyzing of the text involves one interactive process (Wright-St Clair et al. 2011:90). The first task the researcher attends to is a conceptual one – the clarification of own preconceptions of the phenomena being studied. This is referred to as *"bracketing"* and refers to *"suspending as much as possible the researcher's meanings and interpretations"* and entering into the world of the participant being interviewed (Tesch 1992:92).

Bracketing refers to the process of holding suppositions and beliefs in suspension to improve the objectivity of the research. This means that the researcher examines his own ideas and beliefs so that it can be set aside or kept in suspension so that they do not influence any information supplied by the participant being interviewed (Holloway & Wheeler 1996:190). Bracketing requires that the researcher remains neutral with respect to belief or doubt in the existence of the phenomenon, and is key throughout the research process, especially during data analysis.

The data analysis requires that the researcher reads the entire data set. The researcher becomes familiar with the data by reading and rereading it in order to gain a holistic view of the data. Data analysis ensures the uniqueness of each participant's aging experience while allowing an understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Henning 2004:127). It is therefore important that the researcher immerses her-/himself in the research participant's world in order to gain a true understanding of message the participant is attempting to convey.

To interpret the true meaning of the message the research participant is attempting to convey, the researcher used a hermeneutic thematic approach. According to Smith et al. (2009:21) hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation. Valerie Wright-St Clair et al. (2011:90) describes

hermeneutic interpretation of the research text as a process that involves *'listening'* to what the text is attempting to convey by reading and rereading, by thinking, and by writing and rewriting.

Woolfolk et al. (1988:7) describe interpretation as the clarification of knowledge within a circle, in which parts are interpreted within the understanding of the whole, which in turn is understood by understanding the constituent parts of the whole. Information is therefore being interpreted within a larger context of meaning. Smith et al. (2009:28) explain the hermeneutic circle as the relationship between the parts and the whole, at a series of levels. To understand any one of the parts, one looks at the whole, and to understand the whole, you analyze the parts. For example, the meaning of a word becomes clear when seen in the context of the whole sentence. At the same time, the meaning of the sentence is subject to the collective meanings of the individual words in the sentence.

According to Kelly (1999:409), three processes can be associated with hermeneutic thematic analysis: immersion, unpacking and association. Immersion refers to the researcher that familiarizes her-/himself with the data collected to become aware of the details and nuances in order to gain true understanding of the conveyed message. Kelly (1999:409) refers to unpacking as a *"stock-taking activity"*, in which the meanings within the text are unpacked in a similar way that one would unpack a suitcase – a process that helps to generate meaning. Association entails interpreting the data *"in relation to a broader theoretical, historical, cultural or political framework"* (Kelly 1999:410).

5.4.2   The data analysis process

I needed to make sense of large amounts of data that had to be transformed into findings. Terre Blanche & Kelly (1999:141) suggest the following steps in the data analysis process – steps that capture my own experiences:

I familiarized myself with the ideas and theories concerning the topic being studied. By the time the data analysis process started, I was familiar with the meaning of the data (Terre Blanche & Kelly 1999:141). After transcribing the digital recording of the interview, the recording was replayed to check for the accuracy of the transcription. The transcript was read several times to unpack the meaning of the experiences. Personal feelings and experiences were taken into consideration when the data was categorized into themes and codes.

According to Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999:141) induction means to "infer general rules or classes from specific instances". This *"bottom up"* approach involves extracting or finding underlying themes from the data. By using a "top down" approach, one would attempt to find examples used in the data to fit under predefined categories. The *"top down"* or deductive way of reasoning was not used in this project. Use of the participant's own language is preferred in analysis, and Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999:141) suggest thinking in terms of *"processes, functions, tensions and contradictions"* while looking for meta-themes, under which sub-themes may be included. This project was therefore conducted in an inductive way.

Codes and coding are used as ways of indexing or identifying categories of data. The purpose of coding is to facilitate the retrieval of data segments by coding categories. Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999:143) define the coding phase as *"breaking up the data in analytically relevant ways"*. Pieces of information, such as a phrase or a paragraph, which are relevant to one or more of the themes, are identified. Coding is used to expand, transform and re-conceptualize the data, thereby providing opportunities for more diverse analysis.

The process of elaboration involves closer examination of the themes to capture *"finer nuances of meaning not captured by the original"* (Terre Blanche & Kelly 1999:144). During

this phase the coding system used may be amended several times until all significant insights have been captured.

In the final step, the interpretation and checking, I present a written account of the topic being studied, which would be structured according to the themes derived from the data. Attempts are made to eliminate contradictions and to minimize *"over-interpretation"* (Terre Blanche & Kelly 1999:144). I reflect on my role in the data collection and interpretation process by examining my own ideas and beliefs that could have influenced the way the data was collected and analyzed.

I did not make use of a computer-assisted qualitative data management and analysis software tool because I preferred to search for themes and nuances as an involved researcher within a conventional qualitative research design. Patton (2002:446) argues that computer analysis may remove the physical feel for the data.

5.4.3   Themes

Themes provide insight into how people interpret events and situations in their everyday life, and are one way of assigning meaning to an experience. According to Ryan and Bernard (2000:780) themes are *"abstract (and often fuzzy) constructs that investigators identify before, during, and after data collection"*. Themes emerge from the data in the telling and recording of the stories of older women describing their life stories and experience of aging. Themes are used to understand the deeper meaning of the "structure of a lived experience (Van Manen 1990:92). They provide guidelines for discovering the larger dimensions of the lived experience.

Van Manen (1990:106) outlines three approaches in the identification of themes: a holistic approach; a selective approach; and a detailed approach. The holistic approach looks at the text or sentences in the text in its totality. When using the selective approach or highlighting

approach, the researcher would identify words, phrases, and sentences that appear to stress the essential parts of the experience. The detailed approach calls for detailed scrutiny of every sentence or sentence cluster to unpack what it reveals about the phenomena being studied. In the reading and re-reading of the transcripts of the audio recordings, words, phrases, sentences and clusters of sentences that stood out were isolated. Although I made use of all three approaches, the second and third approaches provided a more detailed analysis of the data. They provided material for reflective writing to uncover what Van Manen (1990:101) refers to as *"fundamental life-world"* themes.

This chapter gave a detailed account of the methodological account within the qualitative framework of collecting, analyzing and interpreting of the stories told by the older women in this study. I gave an account of how I approached and involved the research participants, including the ethical considerations that are seen as an important aspect of undertaking any form of research. The procedure of creating themes and the process of coding the various themes were explained. The next chapter contains the presentation of my findings.

CHAPTER 6

6   Analysing the data

The aim of this study was to explore older women's perceptions and experiences of aging and to shed light on how individual women feel about getting older. I approached this study in terms of individual accounts of aging, where every woman interviewed was allowed to convey her unique account of the aging experience. In the analysis of the transcribed interviews, the focus was on the themes elicited from the text rather than to pigeon-hole the information into pre-existing categories. The purpose of this was to allow each woman the opportunity to deliver a personal account of her experience. These stories were based on recorded conversations that took place between the individual research participants and me about their perceptions and experiences of aging. Themes were extracted from the transcribed conversations. It should be noted that the themes identified are not exhaustive, and are based on how the data presented itself to me and my subjective interpretation.

This chapter provides an outline of the participant's profiles before presenting the analyzed data. The presentation of phenomenological data is not straightforward. As Patricia Munhall (2007:199) states, *"there are many different ways to present your findings… for which there is no formula"*. She goes on to suggest choosing a style that effectively communicates the understanding of the particular meaning, which is the reason why I present a short profile of each research participant before considering the study as a whole.

6.1   Participant profiles

Three of the six women who participated in this research were born in South Africa. Of the remaining three women, one was born in the United States of America, while the other two were from Botswana and Lebanon respectively. Five of the six participants were married.

Three were widowed, while two still lived with their spouses in their own homes. One participant divorced her husband after living in separate bedrooms in the same home for a number of years, where she took care of him until he was placed in a care facility. Her ex-husband passed away soon after being placed in the care facility when she no longer could care for him. The divorced research participant also lived in her own home, and was taking care of her frail mother. The remaining three participants lived in a retirement facility. The two widowed participants lived in cottages in the retirement facility, while the single research participant had a room due to her limited mobility. All of the women indicated that they had family members who visited them weekly, and that they could call on if they needed any assistance. The only woman who had no children was the single participant. The next section presents a brief profile on each of the research participants that draws on the interviews and data analysis.

6.1.1 Margaret

Margaret, a 72 year old lady lives in her own two-bedroomed cottage in a complex of simplexes, which she shares with her 92 year old mother. Although her cottage is situated near a convenience store, it is not within walking distance from the larger popular retail stores. She did however have her own vehicle.

Margaret's contact number was given to me by an elderly couple who did part-time invigilating at examination venues at the University of the Free State. They informed her that I would contact her to explain the nature of my study and to possibly recruit her as a research participant for this study. Margaret expressed her willingness to participate in this study when I made contact with her, and invited me into her home. Her warmth and cheerfulness was immediately evident and I found it easy to connect with her.

Margaret was born and raised in Bloemfontein, in the Free State Province of South Africa, and had practically lived there all her life. She describes her younger years as growing up in a very close-knit family environment. She has fond memories of spending her entire youth in the company of her immediate and extended family because they lived in the same neighborhood.

Although Margaret and her husband attended the same school, they only started dating when he was in the navy because he was six years older than she was. They started courting when Margaret was 15 years old. After getting married at a very early age, they had two children, a son and a daughter. Although Margaret would have loved to have had four children, she felt that they could not afford to have more children at the time. Another influencing factor was the fact that she felt that it was a difficult period in her life because her husband was drinking excessively at the time, and soon became an alcoholic.

Margaret started working once her children were in high school, mainly in clerical positions, and retired at the age of 65. Apart from the occasional routine visits to the doctor, Margaret enjoys good health at 72 years of age. She is cheerful, articulate, up to date with current affairs, and used to be the chairlady of the Anglican Woman's Association before her elderly mother, who no longer can take care of herself, came to live with her.

Margaret is a devoted Christian who feels that Christianity is an intricate part of her life. It is what carried her through trying times when she got divorced, when her son passed away due to illness, and when her daughter got divorced and relocated to another province – all in a relatively short period of three years. Although she was divorced, she cared for her husband until he passed away approximately a year after they were divorced by taking him regular meals when he was no longer able to take care of himself.

When she was asked to share her experiences of aging, Margaret told me her life story rather than focusing on her perceptions of aging. For her, aging is a process that happens within the context of one's entire life. For Margaret the topic of aging is seemingly an integrated part of how she has lived her life so far. Although Margaret seems upbeat and positive about her life in general, there are negative aspects of aging that filters through, such as less income and the prospect of loss of independence or ability to go out when and where she wants because she needs to tend to her frail mother.

6.1.2 Donna

Donna, age 74, was introduced to me by Margaret. They have been friends for a number of years due to their link with the Anglican Church's Woman's Auxiliary. I made arrangements to meet with Donna after Margaret informed her that I would be calling her regarding this study. Donna seemed apprehensive at first. After a brief explanation of the study, she was happy to participate.

Donna was born in Botswana, but relocated to KwaZulu Natal Province in South Africa by the time she attended primary school. Her father was a construction worker. Since his work entailed working on various projects, it meant that they had to relocate once that particular project had been completed.

Donna grew up in a household where family values and religion was of great importance. Her mother was a stay-at-home mother, and she had had six siblings – five sisters and a brother, of which Donna was the eldest. They lived in homes that were erected from wooden segments (pre-fabricated homes) that could be dismantled with relative ease once it was time to relocate. These homes were erected in compounds that were shared by the workers who were working on a specific construction site in a rural area. These compounds were usually erected in isolated places which meant that the residents in these camps lived a collective

existence. People were close and usually grew their own fruit and vegetables and exchanged their excess produce with other residence for produce that they did not grow.

Donna attended boarding school and usually only came home on weekends. She describes her father as a very strict man while her mother was a very compassionate woman who tended to all their material needs within the home. She met her husband at high school, and after completing high school, she secured a clerical job in a government institution. They got married a little while later because her fiancé had been transferred to another town. She has two children, a son and a daughter.

Their, what Donna describes as a fairytale marriage, was severely tested when her husband turned to alcohol because of pressures of working overtime to provide for his family, and because of an accident that almost cost him his life. He experienced bouts of depression and aggressive behavior that had led to their third child being still-born.

After reintroducing religion in their lives, life normalized for Donna and she could concentrate on restoring harmony in her marriage. She sees the church they belong to as a place of friendship and belonging as much as it is a place of worship. Donna and her husband are active members in their church, where both of them conduct bible studies and are part of an outreach program that helps others in their community.

Donna describes her family as a close-knit unit and lives for her husband, children and grandchildren. She describes her happiest moments as times spent with their children and grandchildren. Upon retirement, they relocated to Bloemfontein, in the Free State Province of South Africa where they live in a townhouse complex in their own home. While they still enjoy relatively good health at their age, they do find it a challenge to manage their monthly expenditure due to their comparatively small monthly retirement payout. Donna usually scans

the daily discount advertisements in the local newspapers in order to save money on their purchases.

Donna comes across as a very positive person who believes that the abundance of blessings she experiences in life outweigh the trials and tribulations they face from time to time.

6.1.3   Jane

Jane took over as chairperson of the Bloemfontein chapter of the Anglican Church's Woman's Auxiliary when Margaret could no longer fulfill that duty because of her ailing mother. Margaret thus introduced me to Jane since they still kept regular contact. Jane is a 67 year old outspoken woman who loves having friends over for tea. She and her husband live in their own home in one of the suburbs in Bloemfontein where they raised two boys of their own. Both sons emigrated to the United States after they completed their school career.

Jane was born and raised in the United States of America, where she lived with her parents and four siblings – two sisters and two brothers. She was the second eldest child in her family and describes her youth as being a troublesome time for her. Her father was an alcoholic who did not spend much time at home. Her mother worked two jobs to support the family while Jane took care of her younger siblings in the afternoons after school. She would collect them from the neighbor after school and tend to them while doing her school homework. She describes the time spent with them as valuable and sees them as her own children.

She met her husband in Africa when she attended a softball coaching clinic. Softball coaching clinics are practical workshops that help participants to become better coaches. Her husband was one of the softball coaches from South Africa that attended the clinic. She describes that she fell in love with him almost immediately because he came across as being soft-spoken and trusting, and he did not consume alcohol. She left her native country and settled in South Africa soon after, where they got married and lived in Bloemfontein. Her

husband has his own construction contracting business that he runs from home. He lent his brother a large amount of money, which was never returned. She says the money would have been their *"nest egg"* when they retire, but her husband would now have to work until the day he dies. The current economic situation in South Africa has placed strain on her husband's contractor business. Although they manage, there are no additional funds for luxuries in their life. They live a moderate life, and although she would dearly like to visit her family in the United States, there are not sufficient funds available to finance travelling expenses.

Jane is an active member in the Woman's Axillary since she likes to be actively involved in the organization rather than being an ordinary member. It allows her to have input into what is going on, and does not enjoy the feeling of being on the sideline. Religion has always been the backbone of her life and she does not see it as something that is more important as one grows older. Although Jane has heart trouble, for which she takes medication, she still drives around to various meetings, visits friends, and does her own shopping.

6.1.4 Ethel

Ethel grew up on a farm in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. She has an adopted brother, who was the eldest, and is one of four daughters. She describes her mother as being a great needlewoman who taught them to sew and to make their own clothes while her father attended to the running of the farm. She attended boarding school during her high school years where she became asthmatic due to the incorrect medication administered at the time. After completing high school, she did a secretarial course at a technical college before doing a course in Home Science. Home Science included subjects such as dressmaking, pattern cutting and cooking. After completing an additional course in teaching, she went on to teach Home Science at a Technical College in the Gauteng Province of South Africa.

She was offered a job in a clothing factory as a pattern-maker, and took the job since it entailed cutting patterns from the fashion capitals of the world. The long hours standing while cutting the various patterns took its toll on her back, which she injured during her childhood. She left and took up a position as a chiropractor's assistant in Bloemfontein. At the time, they were looking for an assistant who was willing to fly with the doctor to remote places in the country to attend to patients who were not able to visit his chiropractic clinic in Bloemfontein. She stayed there until the doctor she had assisted contracted Alzheimer's, which affected his memory severely. She reluctantly went back into teaching until she retired.

Ethel was never married. She felt that her career was more important, and that a relationship would stifle her career. She does admit to having a relationship at one time, but the relationship ended when her partner was killed in a car accident. After that she focused on her working career. Ethel has great difficulty in walking and walks with the assistance of a walking ring, or walking stick because of an inflamed knee she has had for some time. She also had an operation in which most of her stomach had been removed due to cancer. This makes eating very difficult. Yet she still finds the time to assist her blind neighbor in the retirement facility in which she resides with daily chores such as the sorting of her washing etc.

At 75 years of age Ethel seems a very content woman, who spends her time reading. On weekends, her sisters take her out for lunch and visits to their homes. She feels religion plays an important part in her life, and feels that her religious conviction has strengthened with age. Ethel says she does not fear death. She looks forward to eternity – *"the price has been paid"* (Ethel's transcript, 2012:10).

6.1.5 Rosa

Rosa grew up in a small village not far from Beirut, Lebanon with her family. She had one sister and describes her youth as growing up in a society where children were taught to obey their parents. Although the Lebanese and Jewish citizens lived alongside each other, there was a form of segregation. They were civil towards each other, and although they exchanged well-wishes and food during religious festivals, they kept to themselves. Rosa explains that after World War II, the remaining Jews who survived the German onslaught were promised a country, sparking the longstanding conflict between the Jews and the Palestinians. Refugees from both sides settled in Lebanon until the fighting in Palestine dissipated. Each village had Jewish and Palestinian refugees, waiting for the conflict to end before they could return to their country. When the airstrikes and bombing intensified, Rosa's father decided that it was no longer safe to keep his family in Lebanon and made plans to leave.

Rosa's grandfather was familiar with South Africa since he had visited the country on several occasions. When the Turks occupied Lebanon during World War I, all the Lebanese were drafted into the military. Her grandfather fled to South Africa with his brothers and sister. This was the reason why Rosa and her family emigrated to South Africa instead of going to Europe or the United States. She describes coming to South Africa by cargo ship. They travelled and settled in a small town in the Free State because that is where they had family. They did not understand the language (Afrikaans) and were referred to as *"uitlanders"* (foreigners), which was seen as a derogatory term given to people that came from the Middle East, or the East. Rosa and her sister soon found employment in a supermarket belonging to the family. Although they could not speak the language, they could operate an adding machine. They were employed as cashiers, where they took payment for goods bought.

She met her husband through friends of the family. It was tradition to marry people from your own ethnicity. Although he was also Lebanese, but had been in South Africa since an early

age, so he could speak the local language. Rosa and her future husband had a lengthy courtship – she explains that one had to get to know the family before marrying into it - they got married and had three children of their own, two boys and a girl. After retirement, her husband passed away and Rosa opted to move to a retirement facility where she has a two bedroom unit so that her children can stay over when they visit. At the age of 78, Rosa enjoys relatively good health and is very involved with community service where she assists in feeding the less fortunate. She plays bridge on a regular basis and does her own shopping and household chores.

6.1.6   Charlotte

Charlotte was born and raised in a small town in the Free State Province of South Africa. She was 5 years old when her father left to join the military during World War II. By the time he came back, she was nine years old. Although she describes him as being an alcoholic, she has fond memories of her father. Charlotte's mother played a great part in the memories she had of her father because she shielded the children from the negative experiences caused by her father's ill habit. He later committed suicide, which was a huge blow for Charlotte.

Charlotte worked for most of her adult life, mainly in clerical positions. She met her husband when he started calling at the company she worked for. They got married and had three children. She retired when the company she worked for was restructured. When her husband passed away at age 60, she relocated to a retirement facility. Charlotte enjoys the retirement facility because she has many friends there. She is a regular church-goer, enjoying the fellowship and the community of people this brings her in contact with. She has her own car and values the freedom and independence that it provides.

Charlotte does not see herself as being old, and at 76 years of age, enjoys the freedom of being retired. She still rises at six o'clock every morning and feels she has the freedom to

pursue activities without the obligation of others relying on her to perform set tasks at set times. She still enjoys relatively good health, but feels anxious at times because of her diminishing financial position. The cost of living has almost surpassed her monthly pension. Charlotte describes her happiest moments as those when she spends her time with her children and grandchildren. Charlotte is cheerful, articulate and enjoys interaction with people of all ages. She is an energetic, engaging woman. She is self-reflective, and has the ability to engage freely in conversation with others.

6.2   Themes

The different readings of the narratives provided by the six research participants who were interviewed for this study show the meaning of aging from the perspective of each of their individual experiences. Based on these experiences, interconnected with my own personal and professional experiences and observations that emerge from my interaction with the six participants, the findings are presented under the headings of identified themes. Participant verbatim statements are used to illustrate the themes.

In their interviews, all the research participants make reference to an early busy life, while later life is portrayed as being free to do as they deem fit. De Beauvoir (1977:17) sees aging in terms of an ongoing transformation in one's life, and is thus a process, not a state one finds oneself in. In earlier life, the focus was on the needs of the family, while later life focuses on the self. They recall unrecorded family events that have taken place over an extended period of time, while later life becomes a time where one mellows and finds inner peace once the responsibilities of employment and child rearing have been relinquished.

6.2.1   The free and busy me

Women have almost always been perceived as traditional homemakers. Traditionally, women were expected to provide emotional support, to care for her partner, *"to be a good mother*

and to put her family's and children's needs before her own" (Lamanna & Riedmann 2009:79). Rosa feels she had a responsibility in rearing her children herself. She says:

> I felt I wanted to bring up the children myself. I didn't want to have maids or nannies and so on… (Rosa, 2012:6). I was determined to be a supportive mother. I took them everywhere, and I was there for them in the afternoon, with the homework. That was my pleasure. It kept me busy, but that was my reward – to bring them up (Rosa, 2012:7).

It was difficult for her when her children left home, but her time was consumed by caring for her ill husband. When her husband passed away after being ill for an extended time, Rosa feels she owes it to herself to concentrate on enjoying her retirement. She says:

> It makes me happy to know my children are alright. That is what I live for – my children. Now I can do what I want. I wanted to play bowls, so I tried that. I couldn't do it when the children were here. Now I play bridge, so I'm doing what I want to do, knowing every day that the children are alright (Rosa, 2012: 11).

Rosa is happy in the retirement facility in which she resides. She describes various programs and activities arranged by the facility that members can make use of, such as the library, various excursions to places of interest, entertainment, and bible classes at set times during the week.

Retirement can be a daunting experience for someone who has worked her entire life[16]. It can also mean a lifestyle of being independent, which involves being free to devote time to whichever activity one choses to indulge in. There is no fixed time to adhere to, unless one wants to. Charlotte recalls her first day at home after retiring:

> You know, in the beginning, I'll never forget, the first morning… The first Monday morning when I didn't have to go to work, I sat up in my double bed, made myself some coffee, got back into bed and thought: ah, this is the life. It was March/April. The next thing, my brother-in-law and them came to visit. Then my neighbor comes along. Now, I'm still in my gown

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[16] Explained in more detail in section 2.6.

hey, and um… and then a little while later the minister came. He says: we all thought we'd visit because you are off today! No, I enjoy my retirement very much (Charlotte, 2012:13).

Ethel lives in a retirement facility and is not as mobile as she used to be because of her knee. She gets around aided by a walking ring. She is happy to spend her time reading books from the library and to visit her sister over weekends. She says:

> I enjoy the interaction I have with the folks here. My needs are minimal these days. We get decent meals. We have supper at 5 o'clock, so I can't complain (Ethel, 2012:12).

Retirement also means being free to enjoy activities that add quality to life. It is a lifestyle that affords them a sense of being in charge and choosing what they want in life based on their own means and values. Having time for reading, gardening, and volunteering are especially appreciated. The research participants appear to make a connection between time and occupying themselves with activities that they really enjoy doing. Without the demands of taking care of children or sick spouses, the women are able to devote attention to activities of their preference as well as their needs[17].

Another area in which some of the research participants benefited was the accessibility and availability of community services. At various times in their later years several of the participants were involved, and some are still involved in services such as transportation, soup kitchens, or assisting others who no longer can do general chores. Rosa assists at the church soup kitchen once per week where they supply food to other less fortunate citizens and elderly people in her community. Jane says:

> Look, every Tuesday I take [a friend of hers] grocery shopping and we always go by and have a cup of tea with [another friend of hers] and her mom. That makes me happy. I enjoy being there (Jane, 2012:23).

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[17] Aging is not always perceived in a negative manner, as explained in section 2.4.

Although Ethel suffers with a bad knee and walks around assisted by a walker, she still makes time to help her neighbor. She says:

> She doesn't see so well. So she comes to me and asks me to do her laundry list. When it comes back, she would ask me to check her laundry (Ethel, 2012:11).

Such activities afford many women opportunities for socialization and often enhance their self-esteem and allow them to feel connected or have a sense of belonging.

6.2.2   Social connectedness

In the context of this study, social connectedness is defined as having regular contact with others and/or having a sense of belonging. While none of the research participants make mention that having relationships with others are critical to their well-being, all are aware of the importance of social ties in their lives. The participants in this study speak of a social connection in three primary areas: family, friends, and community involvement[18].

All the women in the study are able to leave their homes to be with people and to participate in activities in their community. Ethel says:

> My sister and I are fortunate to have our younger sister live here in Bloemfontein. We go out to her every Sunday for lunch. Her daughter comes and fetches us, and we all have lunch together. That is a real treat (Ethel, 2012:12).

Margaret expresses that she cared deeply for her family, and besides taking care of her frail mother, she lives for her daughter and grandchildren. Because of her restricted mobility, her friends visit her on a regular basis. Jane visits and has tea with her friend every week and keeps herself busy with Women's Auxiliary activities. Charlotte says:

> My sons are great hey… I've got three. They're very caring. They phone me almost on a daily basis. I am also very close to my brother. After my husband passed away, he was like a father

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[18] As discussed in section 2.7.

to my boys. I can always go to him for advice, and my children used to go to him for advice (Charlotte, 2012:8).

Although Donna enjoys not being dependent on others, she feels that her happiest times are times spent with her children and grandchildren. Remaining active and maintaining social interaction with family and friends afforded older women a sense of satisfaction with what they have, where they had to adapt to limiting circumstances such as lack of money, their own declining health or the illness of others.

All the women state that an affiliation with a church organization is important to them[19]. Whether they are able to attend or not, belonging to a church affords them a feeling of support. Both Donna and her husband are involved with church activities and are actively involved in their community by assisting those who are less fortunate than they are.

Most of the women stay in touch with others by means of telephone calls, or by visits. The connection they have with other people is significant in their lives. Not only do relationships with others offer support and a sense of belonging, the women also offer the same to other people.

6.2.3 Making ends meet

When asked what the toughest part of getting older is, Margaret feels that it is tough managing her finances. It is an aspect that makes her anxious at times since her monthly pension payout does not always stretch out enough, especially when unforeseen expenses are at hand. She said:

> My pension's not very big and all that you know. Look, financially one's always had a battle. Now that I am on pension, I surely didn't work very well with my lump sum that I got out. I am finding it very difficult, and sometimes you're inclined to allow yourself to sort of become anxious about it (Margaret's transcript, 2012:15). You start thinking, what if? Will I be able

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[19] Section 2.9 discusses religion and spirituality in more detail.

to keep it up at the rate everything is just going up, and up, and up? That's scary (Margaret's transcript, 2012:18).

Jane's husband lost all their money saved for retirement. When his brother started up a business, Jane's husband lent him the money to facilitate the startup, but lost it all when the business failed. She says that her husband will need to work until the day he dies because there is no retirement fund to see them through. She explains:

> My husband's a contractor. The money's not there. That's okay too, you know, we… we'll cope with that. At times it gets really tight, but then it loosens up again. We're not starving. Um, we're not wearing thread-bearing clothes. But uh… the days of grandiose schemes are over with. And, just to sit here at night and watch English Premier Soccer; to crawl into bed with a good book, um… we're happy with that – both of us, you know (Jane, 2012:17).

It saddens Donna to see the value of their pension dwindling almost on a monthly basis. Before retirement, Donna and her husband planned on travelling around South Africa, visiting all the places she had only read of, or saw on television. She says:

> I would say… it is easy to feel down about all sorts of things. It is scary, you go to the shops and you see the prices increase weekly. Where is this going to end up? One of these days we won't be able to live! (Donna, 2012:10).

The discussion of financial security at retirement age leans towards the importance of preparing financially for old age and how the lack of preparation had the potential to limit people's lives during retirement. Charlotte said:

> Financially, I'm worried. I'm okay and I manage because I still have my house and I let it, but if they don't pay the rent I've got a problem. You know, they say old people get stingy as they get older, but I know it's not that. It's just… you know, you're not earning anymore, and you got things… I mean, if I had to become frail and go to frail-care, that's a whole lot extra to pay every month. Then it's the maintenance of the car and petrol too. My monthly income seems to be dwindling all the time because of the increased cost of living. Anyway, that's a sad story, and my biggest fear – finance! (Charlotte, 2012:14).

The participants all plan their time and activities in accordance with their financial situation. Being financially restricted does not necessarily mean that all the luxuries in life are redundant. Being financially restricted merely implies having a cup of coffee and a piece of cake with friends at a meeting run by the church or another nonprofit organization, or visiting family members for lunch or supper instead of the regular visit to coffee shops that were sometimes frequented in the past[20].

6.2.4 Home is where the heart is

While the meaning of 'home' represents diverse perspectives and experiences, the overriding meaning that emerges is that 'home' means living in a familiar place among people they are familiar with, where their homes give them a strong sense of privacy, control and independence, as well as a sense of connectedness. A strong sense of emotional and spiritual attachment appears integral to the meaning of 'home' for most participants. Home is where the heart is[21].

Margaret enjoys being out in her garden early in the mornings where she watches the birds while enjoying her morning coffee. She will however consider moving to an old age facility once her mother is no longer there to care for. Jane says:

> Sitting on the back stoep (porch), having a glass of wine, and reading a book makes me happy. Just to sit here at night and watch English Premier Soccer; to crawl on the bed with a good book, um… we're happy with that – both of us, you know (Jane, 2012:17).

All the research participants in this study value the feeling of autonomy their homes give them, more so than living with or near their children. While Rosa is very close to her children, she loves being independent, and being in her own home knowing that her children are able to happily live their own lives. She feels that being on her own affords her the

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[20] The curtailment of activities and conveniences due to restricted pension pay-outs are discussed in more detail in section 2.6.

[21] As discussed in section 2.8.

opportunity to partake in activities that she could not do when she had her children to care of. She enjoys the freedom of being in her own home. She feels happy and content.

All the women's homes I was invited into are neat and modestly furnished. I gain the impression that none of them place emphasis on living in luxury, or that their possessions reflect an important aspect of their identities. Most, proudly display photographs of children and grandchildren, an indication of their sense of pride and the high value that these women place on their families.

For Rosa and Jane, the two immigrant women, 'home' reflects different backgrounds and experiences. Both speak of 'home' as their country of birth, but are quick to point out that their current 'home' is here (in South Africa) where they are happy. Their homes mean a combination of a sense of belonging and a sense of identity. Although both speak extensively of their youth in their countries of birth, their identity as South African citizen and central South Africa as their home is reflected in their account of who they are. Amenity, comfort, familiarity, feeling secure, a sense of belonging, having choices and a positive identity are all important factors in their choice of giving meaning to 'home'.

6.2.5   The aging body and ageless self – managing aging identities

When asked how the research participants feel about growing older, aging is not perceived as an important issue, and most indicate that they have given it little or no thought. McHugh (2000:103) argues that aging is often cast in a negative or problematic manner in terms of physical and social competencies. Clarke (2002:440) agrees by stating that social values concerning physical attractiveness influence perceptions that older women have concerning the aging experience.

When the participants speak about feeling old, they are not commenting on the number of years they have lived, so much as the way they are constructing their identity. There is little

indication that, regardless of chronological age, any of the participants think of themselves in terms of being old, in the sense of negative age stereotypes. Ageism is not raised as an issue in relation to how they feel others treat them[22]. It is however often based on a physiological feeling of age that they associate with feelings of weakness, tiredness, and the inability to perform some tasks that were easily done in the past. Although Margaret feels younger than she is, she feels she can no longer undertake once effortless tasks. She says:

> I think sometimes I'm pushing myself a little bit too hard now at this stage of my life, you know. I've got that kind of tired feeling sometimes and that, but I got something from the doctor now that… it's starting to pick me up now again, you know. Because I mean, it is difficult for me to clean up these days (Margaret, 2012:21). I feel I'm getting too old for those things now (Margaret, 2012:17).

This indicates that changes in abilities, such as cleaning one's home, can result in awareness of aging. It also indicates how aging is experienced through changes in activity – that it is not simply a cognitive experience. The changes in an otherwise menial task such as the cleaning of one's home can be linked to a sense of reduced autonomy. Being aware of the limitations that accompany aging involves adapting to one's own illness and limiting activities to a pace that the body could manage in order to avoid aches and pains following such activities[23].

Donna feels that as one ages, so too you become aware of your limitations. She says:

> I mean, I can't do the things I used to do 20 or 30 years ago, but you learn to adapt. Living at a slower pace is not necessarily a bad thing. Moving at a slower pace allows you to stop and smell the roses. These are little things you used to take for granted when you were younger… always chasing… rushing to do this, rushing to go there. For what? (Donna, 2012:8).

Physical appearance is another aspect that raises age inspired responses. According to Woodward (1991:159), *"both men and women 'put on' youth so as not to be classified as old"*. In this respect, physical aging is perceived as a potential threat to individual identity.

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[22] The concepts of stereotypes and ageism are discussed in section 2.4.
[23] The aging body is discussed in greater detail in 2.10.

Featherstone and Hepworth (1991:385) refer to this concept as the *"mask of aging"*, which is a concept that discusses the way in which appearance can be used to label or describe somebody's age. The "mask" can be seen in a positive aspect, such as when a person's self-esteem or social standing is boosted because of their youthful appearance.

Although Margaret looks younger than she is, she says she sometimes feels the effects of aging. She is no longer able to perform the functions she used to when she was younger, yet she feels that the "inner self" has not changed much. Her inner self therefore does not match her external self, which has aged[24]. Although her outer self is a reality check about her true age of 70, she conveys an ageless attitude towards life in general, and refuses to act old. She says:

> My doctor asked me how old I am now, so I said I am turning 70 soon. He said, but you are old! I says, uh-uh, only my birth certificate that says I am old. I'm not old in here (she points to her head). Here I am 45. I have always been young at heart. Even in my work situation (Margaret's transcript, 2012:18).

> I worked with 20 year olds and 30 year olds. While they used to call the other older ladies "tannie" (aunt), they used to call me by my name, and I appreciated that very much you know (Margaret's transcript, 2012:18).

> As I say, I'm quite prepared to go to a care facility, but I'm also not really fully ready for it and that you know (Margaret's transcript, 2012:18).

A vague self-congratulatory feel about Margaret's statement infers that not looking as old as her chronological age was desirable. As Donna puts it:

> We had some friends over for my husband's 75th birthday a while ago. You know what it's like when old people get together. They talk about their aches and pains, medication and operations… My husband says: Sheez, we don't even have a doctor! We try and maintain a healthy lifestyle by walking every day, just to keep the joints going, you know (Donna, 2012:8).

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[24] The inner and outer conflict is discussed in section 3.2.

It can be scary too. You look in the mirror, and the image you see doesn't quite match up to how you feel on the inside. You tend to feel a whole lot younger than the image you see in the mirror (Donna, 2012:8).

Jane says:

I don't consider myself old yet. I'm only 69. I'm gonna last till I'm 93, so I've got quite a few years yet. You start… my friend who's 85 says, you have to get older, that's biological. I say you get old in your mind. You don't ever have to get old. And it's the truth! I reckon you get old when you let yourself get old (Jane, 2012:18).

Although the participants' complaints are often valid in terms of their physical decline, obvious tensions between their aging body or appearance and the inner self is evident. In other words, the continuity of who they are on the inside does not match the external changes they see when looking in the mirror. Jane thinks you get old when you allow yourself to get old. She says:

Getting old is what you make of it (Jane, 2012:19).

Donna feels that her outer physical image does not match her inner self. She says:

If you see someone regularly, you don't notice the differences, but if you visit someone you haven't seen in a while you can see they have aged. And they can see you have aged! But you need to make peace with that. If you are going to worry about something you have no control over, it can play havoc with your mind (Donna, 2013:13).

Margaret feels blessed in terms of her age when she compares herself to friends she grew up with. She says:

I think if you allow yourself (to think of aging), it can be very scary. I mean, I've got two friends, two school friends. We've been school friends since Sub A (Grade 1). They're my age. […] (The one friend) had a stroke, and now she's been diagnosed with cancer. […]. (The other friend) is asthmatic, and she's got terrible back trouble. I think she's virtually walking with one foot in the grave! I think that scares me (Margaret, 2012:21).

All the women interviewed in this study mention physical health as issues in relation to aging. Jane says:

> You wake up with aches and pains, but at least you know you're alive in the morning! Of course now you've got to watch your blood pressure. You take joy when your blood pressure is 116 over 62. It never used to bother me before. I am on a mild heart tablet, just to handle any anxiety better. I obviously need to play around with pain medicine because of a bad back, but there are some days that are definitely better than others (Jane, 2012:21,22).

Margaret indicates that she is taking chronic medication for her thyroid, cholesterol, and blood pressure. Rosa recently had an operation to install a valve to regulate her irregular heartbeat, and also takes medication for various age related illnesses. Charlotte feels that one gets slower as one ages. She says:

> You want to do more, but you get tired more easily, and that I find very hard because you feel as if you are always moaning. If not to others, then to yourself; I'm too busy, I'm too tired… That's the hard part of aging (Charlotte, 2013:21).

Donna feels she and her husband are more fortunate than most in terms of their health. She says:

> I say thank you every day. Yes we have our aches and pains, but we have no major illness or problems that need medical attention. Most of our friends are on chronic care and pay regular visits to their doctors.

> There are some days when you get out of bed feeling older, when you don't feel like facing the world. But once you are up and going, that feeling usually goes away (Donna, 2013:13).

Becoming a burden to others, especially to family members, as a result of illness in old age is mentioned as major concern. Donna and Rosa elaborate:

> I am fearful of the day that I can no longer take care of myself. I would hate to be a burden for anyone, especially my children. I know they would assist as best they can, but they have their own lives and responsibilities. I would hate being an additional burden (Donna, 2013:13).

I always told my husband, when I am old I don't want to live with the children. I don't expect them to look after me. I feel they have their own lives and you become a burden to them. It would worry me if I was a burden on them. I prefer being independent (Rosa, 2013:15).

Witnessing the struggles associated with age-related illness and caretaking in her old age facility scares Ethel. She says:

I would hate to be bed-ridden or something like that. I wouldn't like that where I am not in control of my daily living. I see some of the cases here where people just lie on a bed, and everything has to be done for them. I find that very difficult (Ethel, 2012:12).

All the research participants mention age-related health concerns, such as aches and pains, arthritis and other joint pains, high blood pressure, and short term memory impairment, such changes, which can hardly be considered as being positive or desirable, yet they attach little meaning to these conditions in terms of how they see themselves in the context of aging.

As in the case of health issues, changes in physical appearance are mentioned by the participants as signs of aging. Typical exterior transformations such as wrinkles and grey hair are commonly perceived as being part of the aging process. Charlotte says:

I always try and look as good as I can. I always get up in the morning, get dressed as best I can, and do my face and hair in the morning. I don't ever leave it, or start cleaning my flat without doing my face and dressing. Sometimes you might see a nice dress or something and it looks so good, but you know it will never look like that on you with an old figure! But I don't let it worry me (Charlotte, 2013:22).

In some cases, the participants do not mention exterior looks, even though they were prompted to speak of changes they have noticed in both their bodies and appearances. Although they are aware of the external changes, it appears as if their identities as partner, mother, grandmother, friend and volunteer are unaffected by their appearances. While feminist literature places emphasis on the negative connotation of women's aging looks, they are consistent with the claim that women rise above societal beauty standards as they age

(Clarke 2001:442). It is evident that the research participants feel that their minds, unlike their bodies, have not aged at the same rate.

These women have countered the effect of aging to some extent by portraying their constructions of self as being strong, independent women living their lives on their own terms – the same way they always had. They point out that although age is an inevitable process that brings about changes, it does not alter the person one is. Although age or aging is used as a category to define a group of people, within the group itself it has little to do with defining who they are.

6.2.6   Independence, a personal choice in old age

All the participants in the study speak of valuing their independence and of wanting to remain independent. Not being a burden on others, especially their children, contribute to positive feelings. As Donna explains:

> I dread the day I have to be a burden to my kids, or to my husband, or anyone for that matter. I enjoy my independence. I don't want to have to rely on others because I can't help myself. I pray every day that God takes me before that happens (Donna, 2012:10).

Charlotte says:

> I know my son said I shouldn't worry about anything, and that he would help if I needed help, but I wouldn't like to… I mean, they have their own family and lives to live now. You sometimes sort of hope you don't live too long. I just hope I don't become a nuisance for anybody (Charlotte, 2012:17, 18).

Ethel echoes this by stating:

> I would hate to be bedridden or something like that. I wouldn't like that where I am not in control of my daily living. I see some of the cases here where people just lie on a bed, and everything has to be done for them. I find that difficult. I don't want to be like that (Ethel, 2012:12).

A key factor in supporting their independence is access to transport. All except Ethel and Donna has access to their own transport. Since Ethel is restricted in terms of mobility, she mostly relies on friends and family to assist in terms of shopping. Donna does not drive. Since most of the shops she frequented are within walking distance, she often makes use of the opportunity to walk, which she sees as a form of exercise and relaxation.

Despite the negative connotation associated with aging (Hazan 1994:13), which include attitudes, feelings, and behavior towards elderly people based on their age (Blaine 2013:176), the participants in this study indicate that they are generally treated with respect in their society. Rosa shares a story where she withdrew money from a cash machine only to find that she was paid short. She says:

> I waited until I got into the car to count the money. I drew R1200, and found that I was R150 short. I counted it over and over. I had to be at the soup kitchen, so I went to the bank afterwards. I wondered whether they would believe me if I told them I had been paid short (Rosa, 2013:14).

After reassuring her that they would sort the problem out for her, the teller at the bank found that Rosa had mistaken a R200 note for a R50 note! The teller did not deal with her mistake in any humiliating manner and she appreciated this reaction. She adds that she felt that most people treat older citizens with respect. Charlotte agrees by stating that the people in her community are mostly respectful towards her and other older people.

Financial concerns are mentioned by all the research participants. All of the women in this study feel uneasy about their finances and share that it is getting increasingly difficult to maintain their standard of living as they aged. Charlotte's pension payout had not increased since 1992. She says:

> What was good then is bad now. A friend of mine said children get cross when you talk about finance, or if you sound stingy. But it is because our earning years are over. That is a worry (Charlotte, 2013:22).

Donna speaks about her husband and her dreaming of travelling to see the country once they had retired, but that never happened. She says:

> It was never going to happen, not on our pension. The cost of living has increased a lot faster than our income. We manage, but it takes careful planning (Donna, 2013:12).

Financial concerns emerge as a dimension deemed as important among women's concerns about aging and is covered in broad terms. All feel that the current economic situation does not favour their disposable income. Instead, it is eroding their income as they age, and places restrictions on various activities. It poses a major concern for most since they are reluctant to turn to their children for help.

6.2.7 Adversity makes you stronger

All the women who took part in this study have experienced varied degrees of adversity during their lives. They not only persevered in the face of adversity, they were able to move beyond adversity and continue with their lives. Resilience, as they view it, is the result of successful adaptation to adversity. Resilience is seldom associated with older persons because of their experience associated with loss and decline, yet older persons have higher levels of subjective well-being than individuals in other age groups (Edwards et al. 2012:1).

All the research participants who were interviewed in this study relate memories from childhood of positive, nurturing relationships with family members, who assist them in coping with adverse situations later in life. Ethel recalls:

> My dad was a very hardworking person. But he made sure that we got all the education we wanted… needed. And… he was a very loving father, always interested in how we were doing (Ethel, 2012:2).

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As a couple, my mother and father were a loving couple. If they had differences, they… it was never in front of us. We were never aware of anything (Ethel, 2012:3).

Ethel describes herself as a career woman, working her way up in the world of work. After a brief relationship that ended abruptly when her partner was killed in a vehicle accident, she renewed her focus on her career, which resulted in her remaining single for the rest of her life. She said:

I was engaged to uh… a gentleman… who was actually a relative of mine. We were fairly closely related and obviously had to keep it a private affair. We often spoke about possible implications of having children… the medical side of this, you know. We were still investigating this when he was killed in a motor accident. That was hard… I tried having other relationships after that, but there wasn't anybody who measured up. His passing away really affected me very much (Ethel, 2012:8-9).

Rosa found it difficult to adapt in a foreign country after relocating from Lebanon. First there was the language barrier, and then they were seen as inferior immigrants. Rosa's family arrived in South Africa during the Apartheid era where groups such as Chinese and Japanese were seen by people on the street as non-white citizens. Being from Lebanon was also seen as being from an undesirable background. She relates the struggles she went through:

When we got here, the National Party had just got into power. And the Afrikaans people in Kroonstad… now you *"moet praat Afrikaans"* (need to speak the Afrikaans language), and so on. We thought an *"uitlander"* (foreigner)… especially coming from the Middle East would be welcome… From Europe, you were welcome, but coming from… ooh, Lebanese, Japanese, and Chinese! The more you tell them no, you're far from Japanese and so on… They were very narrow-minded, the Afrikaner. To think, in Lebanon we were somebody. We were respected. We come here and they call us *"uitlanders"*. It wasn't easy (Rosa, 2012:4).

My sister and I couldn't speak the language, but we could use the adding machine, so we worked in the supermarket as a cashier. You didn't have to converse. You just had to take the money (Rosa, 2012:5). As I say, problems make you stronger (Rosa, 2012:8).

As if settling in a foreign country wasn't stressful enough, Rosa lost her first child during birth. The child was stillborn because he choked when the umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck whilst still in her womb. She says it was a devastating blow for her.

Margaret describes her marriage as being a difficult period of time in her life. Her husband was an alcoholic and used to terrorize her when under the influence of alcohol. She says:

> When he wasn't himself, then he'd look like he was going to take… put his hands around my throat and that you know… One day for instance, I was busy ironing in the kitchen. He came across and [lifted his hand] as if he was going to strike me. But he was a diabetic you know. The psychiatrist said the alcohol and the sugar… could cause a problem. He could kind of lose it you know (Margaret, 2012:10).

> Once when he got threatening again, I said to him: If you touch… if you put your hands on me, I'm gonna throw this boiling water over you! The day I was ironing, I said to him: I'll push this iron against your chest! My friend always used to say to me, *"thrust, grab, and twist"!* You laugh at it now, but while you were in that situation, it was very uncomfortable (Margaret, 2012:10).

Although Margaret and her husband lived together in the same home, she moved into a separate bedroom. They divorced soon after that. Margaret says although she cared about him deeply, she found the smell of alcohol unbearable. She says:

> It really shocked me when my daughter came to me one day (after her husband was moved to a care facility) and said to me, Mommy, it's nice going to bed now and not have to worry about you… But we got through it all (Margaret, 2012:10).

A year after Margaret's husband passed away, her son suddenly passed away. He went to hospital for a minor surgery and never recovered. She says:

> I was there when he passed away. He went in for a gallbladder operation, and contracted pneumonia. They put him on those machines and he just never recovered. We sat there the whole time… I mean, you're supposed to die before your children, you know. There again, I can only say God carried us through it (Margaret, 2012:14).

Three months after that, my daughter came with the bombshell that she was going to divorce her husband. Well, you could have knocked me with a feather off my chair! I said: You're grown up, if you want to make a mess of your lives, go ahead. But I'll fight… I'll go through fire for those grandchildren of mine. Anyway, we all survived it (Margaret, 2012:24).

You look back and know that God carried you through it, because you couldn't do it on your own. Never ever (Margaret, 2012:25).

Charlotte is worried about her dwindling financial situation, and feels that the cost of living increases almost on a weekly basis. While the cost of everything increases, her income does not grow at the same rate. Jane speaks of tough times because her husband is forced to work until the day he dies. Should that day arrive, she will return to her home country, the United States, because she will not be in the position to live a sustainable life in South Africa. They do not have a retirement fund that she can rely on. Margaret speaks about moving into a retirement facility once her mother is no longer there, but says that she probably will be unable to afford the cost of living in such a facility of her choice.

In considering an uncertain future, there is always a strong tendency towards self-reliance and optimism, towards being grateful for and making the best of what they have, considering others and downplaying their own problems or issues they may have encountered during their lives. Perceived problems or inconveniences are expressed as fleeting issues, which could be the reason why the women in the study feel that adversity makes you a stronger person. Although they experience situations or circumstances that may be uncomfortable or unpleasant, there is a certain resistance to change, even if they feel they have no control in a situation. This can be seen in personal tensions experienced during the life course, and who they are as women in their old age. Aging is constructed as an active process of *"wear and tear"*, rather than as a passive process of increased frailty and decline. All the participants who took part in this study cite religious involvement as a means to add meaning to life during times of personal adversity. I deal with religion in the next theme.

6.2.8   Religion, finding meaning in life

"The human person needs to find a reason (purpose) to live; that true fulfillment is hardly possible without a sense of purpose (spiritual direction) in life … the central issue for the human person is not the struggle to survive but the struggle to find and experience meaning in life" (Shantall 1997:531).

The inner strength that women possess can be attributed to their belief and relationship with God. Nygren, Norberg, and Lundman (2007), as cited in Manning (2012:106) define inner strength as *"having the capacity to practice self-control and self-determination, while experiencing a sense of mastery, positive self-control and psychological wellbeing"*. Inner strength as displayed by older women over their life course can be attributed to their strong conviction towards spirituality, which enables them to deal with challenges. Their strong spiritual core allows them to become more accepting as they age and continue to develop spiritually (Manning 2012:106).

All the participants in this study use spirituality in one form or another to cope with the stresses and losses experienced throughout their lives. It is having a sense of something greater than oneself that grounds them. All the women describe themselves as being faithful, or as relying on a higher power. They express their spirituality as a resource that is drawn upon in their daily lives, especially during times of adversity. Studies done by Stuckey (2001:5) identify religion and spirituality as important coping mechanisms throughout the life course. The study focuses on the identification of both spiritual and religious components that people rely on during stressful life experiences. The results identify five common themes: attributes of God and faith; spiritual growth; values; definitions and details, care giving and other noteworthy life events. It is found that persons are more likely to turn to their religious and spiritual beliefs and practices during negative life events, such as the death of a loved one, or uncertainty during their life course. Most comment that when they are in need of

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support, they are most likely to turn to God or to their spiritual support networks (Stuckey 2001:6).

Religion is perceived as a *"road map"* for life. The power and purpose of prayer is evident, and forms a foundation on which they base their lives (Stuckey 2001:7). The answers to life's details, which theologians and philosophers contemplate on a regular basis, are of no real importance. What is of importance is that God exists and is real to them. The specifics do not matter. All the people in the study rely on their religious or spiritual beliefs and practices when faced with coping with noteworthy and stressful life events (Stuckey 2001:8).

Active participation and involvement in an organized religious institution affords meaning and purpose in life. The church community is seen as a primary source of support and caring. Most attend church services at least once weekly. The only reason Margaret cannot attend church service on a regular basis is because her mother, who lives with her, needs constant supervision. The women who live in the retirement facility had access to church services offered at the facility.

The research participants all make mention of the fact that they grew up in homes where religion formed a platform on which they base their lives, something that has carried them through their lives. They are all active church members. Rosa says:

> I grew up… my grandfather was a church minister. My dad knew the principles of the church, of the Lebanese Orthodox (Rosa, 2012:8).

Jane said she was born and raised in the Lutheran Church. When she relocated to Bloemfontein, in South Africa, from the United States, the Lutheran Church only held three services a month, one in German, while the other were held in Afrikaans. Since her husband was a Methodist, she started attending the Methodist services instead, because they were in English. She says:

I'm quite at home with the Methodist Church. It is pretty much my life outside of the house (Jane, 2012:15).

Donna sees religion as a pillar of support in her life. She elaborates:

Look, I have always been a Christian, and God has always been there to help me through the good and the bad times (Donna, 2012:8).

Charlotte is very involved with the Methodist Church. She was district president of the Women's Auxiliary by the time she retired, and is still very involved in the church, where she still hosts morning bible studies. She says:

I am a committed Christian. I am not one that walks around with the bible under my arm. Not at all, but I couldn't get up in the morning without praying. I do devotions, evening and morning, and go to church on a regular basis. It is what gives me strength (Charlotte, 2012:10).

Since all the research participants had been exposed to religion and spirituality from an early age, Jane feels that religion has become more important as she grow older. She says:

I hate the word religion. Jimmy Swaggart had religion… It… I've probably gotten closer to God living here than I would've living in the States. There I had family. Here I don't, so I just had to rely on Him. The kids left, I relied on Him even more, and as you get older you kind of realize that it's the only thing you can rely on (Jane, 2012:15).

Ethel feels that religion has, and still forms a vital part of her life. She says:

I accepted Him as my Savior, and that was my philosophy in life. It still is. I have no fear of death. I think my religious convictions have strengthened as I get older, and nearing the fact that anything can happen any day… (Ethel, 2012:10).

Being actively involved in their church or community gives them the feeling that they are making a valuable contribution in their community. It affords them meaning and purpose in life, which leads to a sense of contentment and acceptance of self. Acceptance is described in terms of accommodating life's complexities and mystery, as well as approving of themselves

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and of others. Acceptance allows for recognizing the difference between regret and reflection, which enables older women to practice radical acceptance of their circumstances, which is often reflected in the way older women describe aging or mortality with a degree of calm and peace (Manning 2012:104). Mortality is accepted because of the increased limitations that are being experienced in their lives, which may explain the absence of death anxiety.

6.2.9 Where to from here?

The participants were asked what they thought mattered most for them in terms of the future. As expected, conversations regarding the future do not seem as important as matters regarding the present. All the women in the study value various family relationships and indicate that those remain an important aspect of their lives. Being able to spend time with those who matter in their lives is of importance. As discussed earlier, all the women except for Ethel have children and grandchildren with whom they have very close family connections. For Ethel, spending time with her sister on weekends was the highlight of her week.

Giving, whether in the form of volunteering or helping others, features prominently in the women's responses as an activity (and identity) and is found to become even more significant as they age. It forms an important part of their lives because they are able to dedicate more time to such activities as a result of being retired. Financial concerns are an aspect mentioned by most of the participants. They are concerned about the shrinking value of their monthly income, and are reluctant to turn to children or other family members for help since it creates a feeling of becoming dependent and a burden. In other words, it erodes their feeling of independence.

While most of the women in this study are cautious regarding their projection of the future, Donna is notably negative regarding future prospects in South Africa. Her great concern is

the employment prospects for her grandchildren. Will they find suitable employment one day? Will there be peace? Is there a future for them in this country? Although she hopes that there will be vast improvement in current affairs, and that she is concerned about it, she mentions that she probably will not be witness to it all. The greatest fear regarding the future is the loss of independence; not being able to care for themselves any longer. Almost all of the research participants mention the negative prospect of being placed in a high care facility. They share their fear of losing their dignity and not being able to perform duties that most take for granted, such as taking care of one's own personal hygiene and being able to eat unaided.

In conclusion, whether the women in this study see the changes associated with aging as good or bad, most are satisfied with how reality unfolds as they got older. The attainment of wisdom, maturity, and life experience outweighs the negativity of a declining physical body and various illnesses associated with aging. They feel more at ease with who they are, and are happy in knowing that their children are happy and content.

Changes in living conditions such as having more time to devote to church activities and various community events affords them a sense of freedom and control over their lives. They are free of caring for young children, but at the same time, the well-being and future of their grandchildren is a concern for most. All the research participants view themselves as capable, independent women, in control of their lives and living life on their terms, having choices about how and what they participate in. Their lives evolve in conjunction with their age, changing needs and circumstances, and their financial means.

The loss of independence is a primary concern for the future. It is apparent, in their discussion of aging that factors such as independence and choice are no longer taken for granted. The loss of such tangible aspects means a downward spiral in their lives where they

no longer have that feeling of control. Almost all of the women indicate that they would rather die than be a burden to others. Being a burden refers specifically to being cared for by family members, and is seen as being a helpless recipient of care or being in a situation where they have limited independence or the right to make choices.

When asked to reflect on probable influences that may have contributed to the positive aspects of aging in their lives, almost all fondly speak of the close relationships or bonds they have with their immediate family members. Religious faith and active participation in church activities is the other key factor that adds meaning to their lives. Religious faith and active participation in various church activities takes away the fear of an uncertain future and of dying.

6.3 Dimensions of identity

While the preceding section focused on primary themes I identified from the interviews, the next section will focus on specific roles or identities that are of importance to the research participants. I discuss dimensions of identity that the participants value in their lives, such as being a mother, a wife or companion. This section also discusses additional family roles or identities and how religion or spirituality forms a central component of who these women are and how they live their lives.

The aging experience is explored in the analysis because it forms the key definition of who these women have become[25]. Chronological definitions of age define and regulate people throughout their lives, for example, legal entitlements such as: at what age one can obtain a driver's license, get married, or be eligible for retirement. It also contributes to the manner in which others believe you should behave at various stages in your life. Although the chronological ages of the participants in this study have an effect on their lives, it primarily

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[25] Identity as concept is discussed in chapter 3.

refers to how long they have lived or how old they were when key events occurred in their lives. Chronological age however overlooks factors that include socioeconomic circumstances, health, and lifestyle, all of which affect the individual aging experience more than the mere passing of time. The analysis, however, is based on the experience of aging, not on chronological aging.

These women see themselves as persons living their lives, increasingly on their own terms. Being free from caring for children, or for an ailing spouse affords them the time to reflect on choices made in the past and the various identities or roles they fulfilled throughout their lives. Although the passing away of a spouse is seen as a great loss, aging is about continued growth and renewed independence. The participants who took part in this study generally view aging in terms of personal identity and social relations. Observations are often made by the participants in terms of age being a state of mind, or one is old because you regard yourself as such. Although the outer physical person had aged, they are in essence the same person they always have been, which could often be the reason why they feel younger than their chronological age.

The women in this study were encouraged to share extensively the identities they value, and to recall transformations in their identities that had occurred in the past and to anticipate any changes likely to happen in the future. Inquiring about participants' identities and their changeability over time is meant to provide a more meaningful understanding of the elements that influence aging experiences. Identities are seen as a key element in understanding women's subjective experiences with aging.

In the interviews held with the research participants, they were asked about those identities that they value most or to define how they see themselves. As expected, family-orientated identities such as mother or wife and to a lesser extent, daughter, sister, or grandmother are of

importance to them. Friendships play an important role in most of their lives. Other aspects that are raised as central to their identities include religion or spirituality, and helping in the community.

There is no significant importance attached to identities that relate to educational level, occupation, or income, except for Ethel who focuses on following a career after the death of her partner. Based on the study, I group the significant identities that are deemed as important in sub-sections under dimensions of identity.

6.3.1   Mother

All the research participants, with the exception of Ethel, have children. Thus, it is not surprising that being a mother (in Margaret's case, a single mother after her divorce) is frequently mentioned among the women. For these participants, motherhood has strong positive connotations and is at times regarded as their most important role or identity. All the participants who have children see the time spent with their children from a very early age as a precious time in their lives, and still all have great relationships with their children. The centrality of motherhood affords them a sense of fulfillment and success in that role.

Although Margaret and Donna have dual roles, namely that of mother and working woman, the attention they afford their children are of no less quality than those mothers who devoted all their attention to their children during their younger years. Motherhood enables them to forge strong bonds with their families. Although Margaret lost her son to illness, her relationship with her daughter and grandchildren allows her to concentrate on the positive aspects instead of dwelling on the death of her son. Rosa feels that her daughter's divorce was a devastating blow to their usual family bond, but is happy in knowing that her daughter has found true love with her new partner. She says:

It was out of the blue. Her husband just came home one day and said he can't go on like this because he loves her like a sister. When she came home, we couldn't talk about it because he (Rosa's husband) was there, and we didn't want to upset him. They had a daughter. It wasn't easy breaking that news to [….] (Rosa's husband). Now she's got a fantastic husband (Rosa, 2012:8).

Jane feels that because she has such a close and open relationship with her two sons, they were able to leave the country and start careers of their own in the United States without major disruption in their lives. She feels that she raised them to be respectful. She says:

So when they (her 2 sons) went over, I said: "Mamma listen, these are not American boys, so don't expect them to act like American boys because they won't." And she said, well, after they'd been there, she didn't realize the cultural difference was so big. She says, "But I'll tell you what I do like is that when the boys stand up when an adult comes into the room!" (Jane, 2012:1).

Although Charlotte feels that her sons were very different in many ways, they are all very caring – something that was instilled from a very young age. She says:

I got great sons. I've got one who's a problem for me [laughs], because he drinks too much, and I don't like it. He's a big strong man, not a mommy's boy. But he phones me every day. Are you alright? If he can't get hold of me, he phones his brothers to ask them if they have spoken to me that day. The other two are more steady and have great jobs (Charlotte, 2012:8).

Donna and Rosa mention the pride they felt raising their children and witnessing their development. All the mothers indicate that raising their children was most probably their most significant life project. For Rosa, her youngest son's speech impediment at an early age was a major obstacle, but speaks with great pride that the motherhood journey brought her a great deal of satisfaction despite his speech problem. Although he still at times has a speech problem, he dies not allow it to reign in his ambitious nature. She explains:

He didn't have a nice primary school because the children teased him and so on. He stuttered. I was determined to be a very supportive mother. It affected me terribly as a mother. I was determined… I took him to so many different speech therapists. When he was there, he

stuttered more. Funny, he liked impersonating others, and when he impersonated others, he never stuttered. He was relaxed. I realized that and decided, let him be. It set him back, but he did all right.

I took him everywhere, and was there for them in the afternoon with their homework. That was my pleasure. My reward was to bring them up (Rosa, 2012:7).

All the participants who have children emphasize the importance of maintaining good communication with the younger generations. Charlotte, Jane and Rosa proudly mention their ability of making use of technology, such as email and Skype, to stay connected with their children overseas. Although Ethel does not have any children of her own, she echoes this sentiment when she speaks of her time as a teacher. She recalls that some of her students still approach her for guidance and advice long after her retirement from teaching.

As illustrated in the above accounts, a high investment in motherhood pays good dividends for the women in this study, and embraces motherhood as a central identity.

6.3.2 Wife and/or companion

Barring Ethel, who was never married, all the other women were married once. Margaret divorced her husband because of his drinking problem, but still cared for him until the day he died. Marriage was seen as a sacred institution, and it was up to the couple in their respective marriage to ensure that it worked. Divorce was not seen as a ready option. Partnership was for life. Margaret says:

I never wanted to get divorced because I felt it was wrong, and I mean, those years we still said: "For better or for worse", and I mean, and then it got worse… (Margaret, 2012:26).

Rosa, Jane, Charlotte, and Donna, who refer to their relationships as a central identity, cherish qualities such as friendship, support, mutual respect, and good communication within their relationships with their spouses. They have nothing but appreciative words to say about the men they were married to.

> My husband was 10 years older than me. He was very helpful, and a kind person (Rosa, 2012:5).

> When I married my husband I respected him more than I loved him. I grew… uh, but I did love him to marry him, but I grew into the love because I could… trust him. He was stable. He was the complete opposite of my dad. He wasn't a drinker. He was a bore, but I could rely on him (Jane, 2012:5-6).

> My marriage was good, it was really good. But he died at 60, which at the time didn't seem too young, but now I know it's too young (Charlotte, 2012:5).

> We are a happy family… very close… we still are. My husband was very protective over his kids. Although my husband is a bit hard-headed, he has a heart of gold (Donna, 2012:7).

Marriage is seen as a sacred institution that one works on until *"death do us part."* Both Margaret and Rosa express how devastated they were when they learned that their daughters were getting divorced. In addition to sharing a range of social and circumstantial influences that possibly had an influence in their lives over the years, Rosa fondly recalls milestones pertaining to her relationship, such as the first dance she had with her *"then-to-be"* spouse at a wedding she attended, and how she kept her daughter's pending troubled relationship from her husband in the initial stages. She says:

> My husband asked me to dance, and um, I danced with him. And then the groom's brother saw me dance and came and asked me to dance. By then I was so the hell in because I can't converse (she had just immigrated from Lebanon), I can't talk. All I said was: *"Can't dance"*. He (her husband) said: "Can you walk?" I said: "Can't walk." He got so cross. I felt bad because I thought; here I am disgracing the family and so on. They couldn't speak Lebanese! (Rosa, 2012:5).

Although some of the women refer to their differences and complimentary personalities within their marriage, they perceive it as maintaining a healthy balance in the relationship. All however speak of their husbands as being the head of the household.

For Jane, the most important thing about her marriage is the mutual respect they have for one another, and that her husband knows her better than anyone else. The close bonds referred to above can be seen as an important source of support as one grows older.

Despite the positive effects of relationship closeness, there was also the sadness of outliving their partners and being left alone. Both Rosa and Charlotte make reference of missing their husbands who had passed away and that they felt alone at times. Rosa says:

> He was happy when he had his family around him. His brothers branded him as a boring man because he never did anything exciting. I still miss him… (Rosa, 2012:7).

As mentioned earlier on, Ethel was never married. Although she had a fleeting relationship with a close family member, it ended abruptly when he was killed in a motor vehicle accident. She feels that, although she attempted to start relationships with other men, none could match the expectations set by the relationship she had with her first love. She says:

> I had numerous boyfriends, but there wasn't anybody that sort of measured up. His passing away really affected me very much. It was hard… (Ethel, 2012:9).

Ethel expresses that she had no desire to enter an intimate relationship after the loss of her partner. She embraces singlehood as a permanent identity.

As seen from the example above, for most of the women, their marriage or companionship is of utmost importance. It gives them a sense of continuity with their past, present, and future, while others attach less emotional value on their relationships. The outlook of the single woman (Ethel) is that she has no desire of wanting to get involved with a man again.

6.3.3   Family identities and friendships

The research participants raise direct family relationships such as with daughter, sister, mother, or grandmother as one of their important identities. Some perceive parents as

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negative role models, or as people with whom they experienced intense, but difficult relationships. Charlotte, for example, expresses that she did not want to reenact her father's *"negligence"*. She says:

> What he did do was… he disappeared from home. He'd start drinking in the morning, and we didn't see the difference. He wasn't a bad guy, but was an alcoholic. I was 23 when he died. He committed suicide. It left my mom without an income, which was sad you know, because they had a sad life and they really should have been okay, you know (Charlotte, 2012:2-3).

Jane speaks about having learned not to repeat the mistakes made by her parents. She says:

> Look, I would've been a daddy's girl if my dad hadn't been an alcoholic. I think the old man blew it. I didn't have much respect for him (Jane, 2012:5). When we used to say to my mother: "Mamma, just leave him, we'll get jobs, and we can support… between you and us, we can keep the family going, just… just divorce him; walk away." My mother would say: "What would he be without us". She loved him till he died (Jane, 2012:6).

Of her own relationship she says:

> I'd say to […] (her husband): "Bloody hell, I don't even have a place to go if I'm cross with you." By the time I saved the money, I probably won't wanna leave anymore. But even if I'd got over there (United States), my mother would say: "Hey, just head back; I don't wanna know your troubles" (Jane, 2012:7).

For some of the women, despite stating that they had difficult relationships with some family members, they reveal that siblings and parents were a major source of support and friendship. For example, Ethel feels she has a very close relationship with her sisters who live in town, while Jane has a very close relationship with her brothers and sisters who live in the United States, with whom she corresponds regularly.

All the research participants, except for Ethel, are grandmothers. They value that identity and speak fondly of the close relationships they have with their grandchildren. Although Ethel has no children of her own, she emphasizes the great relationships she had with her students, and

with her nieces. Margaret speaks fondly of her aunts and recalls the time spent with them as she grew up. She expresses the importance of family and of helping each other. She says:

> My family is very important… I had an aunt, my mom's one sister. She was my best friend. She had two younger sisters too. I mean, the three of us shared a room together and that. They weren't like aunts to me, they were more like friends sort of thing, you know (Margaret, 2012:24).

For Rosa, family connectedness has always played a vital role. Family tradition was always part of who she became. She says:

> Old Lebanese traditions are that the children obey the parent's wishes. The family tried to match-make me. They felt if I got married and stayed on in Lebanon, my parents would have to go back to visit and so on, but I kept saying no, whatever my dad said, and so on. My father said he wanted his whole family together (Rosa, 2012:3).

While families play a vital role in their lives, most of the participants mention a friend or friends as an important part of their lives. It features as an important resource on a day to day basis since friendship is based on choice. The process of aging together and often sharing various life events is a source of enrichment for most of the women. Helping others form the basis of Ethel's friendship. The investment in her friendships appears to reassure her that others would return the favour should her own health further deteriorate. At the time of the interview, she was assisting a blind woman who lives in the same retirement village with the sorting of her weekly laundry. She says:

> My neighbor doesn't see too well. So she comes to me and says something like: "Would you like to come and do my laundry list for me?" When it comes back she would ask me to check her laundry for her. I don't mind, because I am still able to help (Ethel, 2012:11).

Longstanding friendships are usually credited with making a difference in their lives. While Margaret's longstanding friendships have been affected since she has to care for her ailing mother, she nonetheless describes her friendships as being an important aspect of her life.

In this study, all the participants speak of close and lasting connections they have with others, which provides a valued resource as they age. The friendships had with others are not peripheral to their identities. Instead, it plays a central role in their lives and is as important as family relationships.

6.3.4 Religion or spirituality

All the participants who took part in this study indicate that religion forms a vital part of their lives, and therefore speak of this dimension as a central component of their identities. Religious faith is the main driving force that influences major life decisions and actions. All express that their relationship with God is what guides them on a daily basis. Although there is no clear indication that religion becomes more important as one ages, their identity as Christians is what helps them grow as individual, especially in times of hardship and loss.

Almost all the women in this study are connected with the Methodist Church's Women's Auxiliary (WA). Structures within organizations such as the WA give older women a sense of identity. Although they may not always agree with every decision made within such organizations, it gives them a sense of guidance and importance. It is interesting to note that those in the role of leadership were reluctant to relinquish their leadership once they had attained it. Margaret was the district secretary at one stage. Her duty was to write letters to update those women who could not attend regular meetings. She reluctantly had to relinquish her position when she had to care for her frail mother. She indicates that she would love to involve herself with the organization once her mother was no longer with her. Charlotte is still very involved with the WA, and became the circuit steward after the death of her husband. At the time of the interview with Jane, she was the president of the local WA and shares that it is her life *"outside the house"*.

One of the best illustrations of dedication to religious conviction is Charlotte, who shares that her relationship with God is a main component in her life. It is what guides her every day. She says:

> I am a committed Christian. It has… I am not one that walks around with the Bible under my arm. Not at all. But I couldn't get up in the morning without praying. I do devotions, evening and morning, and I do go to church on a regular basis. I go to the early devotions here (at the retirement facility she resides at), and take a turn at doing it. I'm not good at doing it, but I need to. I can, like, talk to the Lord in my own time (Charlotte, 2012:10).

After her husband passed away, Charlotte's involvement in the WA filled the void of being alone. Her identity as a Christian became increasingly important, and the feeling of being alone helps her to understand that she needs to grow as an individual and as a religious believer.

For Rosa, pleasing God is always going to be a central life mission. She says:

> When the children were small, I wasn't in the church so regular like before. So one day I went to church, and we were coming out and shaking hands with the minister and he said: "Welcome to the Christian." I was so offended you know, I thought; no, I'm not reborn, I've been a Christian all my life! In your daily life, whatever you do, you do with God's help. I find it… it works (Rosa, 2012:9).

Ethel also indicates that her faith in God is helping her in dealing with life's struggles and uncertainties, especially in the context of her deteriorating health. She says:

> I accept Him as my Savior and that was my philosophy in life, and it still is. I have no fear of death. I think my religious convictions have strengthened as I get older, and nearer the fact that anything can happen any day… Living in a place like this (the retirement facility) you… you see it continually, and yes, I am not afraid of death. It creates awareness of the fact that we all need to go at some stage. I look forward to eternity. The price has been paid (Ethel, 2012:10).

In conclusion, religion and spirituality not only plays an important role in all the research participant's lives, it also serves to help them cope with various adversities, including age-

related issues such as declining health and the loss of loved ones. Most feel that God has a plan for their lives, and that things happen for a reason regardless of whether or not the reason is apparent. God is control of their lives. God is both protector and provider, and faith will see them through whenever there is a real problem. It gives them a sense of direction (Stuckey 2001:6).

6.4 Discussion

The aim of this study was to gain insight into the ways older white women in central South Africa construct their experiences of aging, as well as to explore the possible links between those experiences and women's identities. Readers are given the opportunity to see the world of the aging woman from her own perspective. This affords the participants the opportunity to be respected as informants of their own lives as opposed to being subjects of research (Coleman 1992:74).

The questions posed in the first chapter regarding older women's perceptions of aging, and more specifically, how they experience physical and cognitive aging, how retirement has changed the way they adapt to and manage everyday living, how past experiences have shaped their present life, and how aging has influenced their relationships within society and with those close to them, have been addressed during this study.

The individual aging experiences are based on own experiences and subjective evaluations of those experiences. Although various theories provide valuable information regarding aging, it is of great importance to take cognizance of individual differences as well as to take similarities in aging into account when dealing with individual women.

Based on the narrative accounts of the research participants, it is evident that their attitude towards aging is based on experiences of their individual aging processes. The six women who participated in this study appear to be independent, capable, resilient, mostly active,

articulate, satisfied and fulfilled. They seem to do the things they want to, when they chose to do them. They have family that they close relationships with, friends to enjoy time with, places to go and things to do. They seem to live life somewhat autonomously, feeling comfortable with who they are and how they look. Although the literature emphasizes negative aspects such as stereotypes (Bee 1996:6; Hazan 1994:15), none of the participants' accounts reflected the negative implications of such social constructions. The unintended consequence of the emphasis researchers place on aspects of age and aging often overlook the positive, enriching aspect of the aging experience. Thus, it is important to allow these older women to tell their stories in their own voice. A positive attitude towards the aging experience may not necessarily be linked to past experiences in a direct or contributing manner. An awareness of women's attitudes towards the aging experience can assist in creating awareness of the choices they have at their disposal to respond to the challenges of aging. It could also assist in creating the understanding that they are active participants in determining the quality of life they wish to experience as opposed to merely being passive observers (Brown 1998:102).

Chronological aging is often the benchmark used by researchers, health professionals and policy makers to assess and define aging (Gubrium & Holstein 2000a:5). To the participants, chronological age had little meaning, beyond being useful to describe the passing of time. Age features more as a construct used to make reference to other people in their age group. According to the participants themselves, they are still the same people they used to be. Age was an aspect that they were aware of in terms of their limited abilities, but it only formed a small part of their personal stories. Being actively involved in the attitude towards the aging experience has an influence on areas such as contentment, self-esteem, cognitive function, and emotional well-being (O'Reilly et al. 2004:3), which can lead to living a more satisfying and healthier life (O'Reilly et al. 2004:12). Women who enjoy good health in their advanced

years perceive aging in a more positive manner than women in poor health. According to Bee (1996:447), *"poor health reduces options"*, since it diminishes that positive association women have with living a happy life. It also impacts on the perceived sense of control they may wish to have on their lives. Family forms a deeply significant aspect in the lives of the participants, with conversations often focusing on the achievements of children and grandchildren. Personal friends and their involvement in various community and church activities form the other vital focus areas that are of great significance in their day-to-day lives.

In conclusion, the analysis suggests that older women resist social constructions that depict them as being frail, needy and dependent old ladies. Instead, they perceive themselves as proud, independent women, who are in control of their own lives, making personal choices about how they wish to live their day to day lives. Although these women are aware of their physical restrictions, it does not deter them from enjoying the aging experience. There is an understanding and acceptance that choices may be constrained by elements such as financial shortcomings and declining physical health, but having the ability to exercise control over the process of choices is of importance to the participants. They seemingly have the ability to work around any perceived difficulties and continue to participate as actively as possible. The meaning of being independent shifts from doing everything themselves, to doing what they are capable of and exercising the choice regarding what they do and what is done for them. Aging in itself is therefore not constructed as a problem if you have access to resources and social networks to support your life. Being older is constructed as providing a sense of liberation, where active involvement and participation in various community activities is seen as an important aspect in the growth and maintaining of an enjoyable later life.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent

The aging experiences of English speaking older white women in central South Africa
Department of Sociology, University of the Free State
Informed Consent Form

I …………………………………………………………………………….. (Full name), do hereby declare that:

I agree to participate in a Masters study in the Narrative Study of Lives entitled 'The aging experiences of English speaking older white women in central South Africa' and that data may be collected from me in an interview session with the researcher, Ferdi Hellerle.

Ferdi Hellerle has recruited me for the research. He has informed me that the research explores the aging experiences of English speaking older women in central South Africa.

I understand that:

I do not have to divulge information of a personal nature.

The research topic is potentially provocative and I may be exposed to insights, information or viewpoints that could make me feel uncomfortable.

My participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw personally, or to withdraw my data, from the research at any time.

The researcher pledges to protect my privacy to as great a degree as possible and to conduct the research sensitively, responsibly and ethically.

I am free to approach the researcher, Ferdi Hellerle, or the project supervisors, Professor Jan K. Coetzee and Dr. Florian Elliker, with any questions or issues related to this research and to have these addressed to my satisfaction.

I am satisfied that adequate steps will be taken to protect my privacy:

- The in-depth interview will be audio-recorded, but I will choose a pseudonym before data is recorded so my real name will not be on the recording, nor will it appear on transcriptions.
- This consent form will be kept in a safe place by the researcher until the completion of this study. This also will apply to audio-recordings – once data has been transcribed, the researcher will erase any copies of audio recordings.
- After the research is completed, data may be used for presentations or journal articles. However, information or data will not be traceable to me personally.

Signed (Participant) ………………………………………….

Date ……………………… Place ……………………………...

Signed Witness 1 ……………………………….. Signed Witness 2 …………………………………….

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

A brief background including aspects such as:
- Where you grew up?
- Your relationship with your parents and siblings?
- Your relationship with your husband and children?

Important identities (present)
- Things in your life you consider to be really important: Family – your role as wife, mother, grandmother in terms of how you see yourself? (Probe to find the significance and importance of each identity mentioned).
- Describe the quality of your relationship
  - What does/did this relationship mean to you?
  - How does it make you feel about yourself?
- Other roles/identities that are really important? E.g. friendships, religion.
- How do they define who you are? (If unclear, probe).

Changes in identity – past/future
- Have these roles/identities mentioned always been an important part of your life?
  - If not, why has it become important?
- Any roles/identities that used to be very important to you that is no longer of importance?
  - When did things change, and in what ways?
- When looking at the future, what matters most?
- What makes you feel happy/sad?

Feelings about aging
- When think of your own aging, how do you feel about it?
- Do you see aging as an experience that involves primary gains or losses? Explain.
- How old do you feel?
- How do see other people your age? How do you think they see you?
- What makes you feel older/younger?

Feelings on physical changes
- Could you share how you perceive the changes in your own body and physical appearance as you age?
- How do these age-related changes make you feel? Positive/negative?
  - Why do you view it in that way?
- What do these changes mean to you in terms of how you feel about yourself?
- When thinking of the identities/roles that are really significant in your life, does the fact that you are aging influence how you see yourself or how others see you in these roles?

Maintaining or achievement of important identities
- Thinking about aging in the context of the identities that were mentioned as being important to you: (e.g. being a mother, wife, close friend, religious etc.)
- Do you think your views on aging may be influenced by the roles/identities that are important to you? (e.g. your mostly positive/negative feelings about aging may be influenced by the fact that you are so invested in being a mother/close friend/religious?)
- What impact do those identities you value have on how you experience aging?
- As you age, does it get easier/harder for you to hang onto the identities you value?
- Can you think of any aspect of your life that may have had an influence on your feelings about aging?

- Do you have any thoughts on what, if anything could be done to enhance your life or that of other older persons?

- If you could go back 40 years and give yourself some advice about preparing for growing older, what would that advice be? (or what advice would you give your children about preparing for old age?)

Summary

The aim of this study was to explore the aging experiences of older white English speaking women in central South Africa. The initial motivation for this study came from a conversation I had with my study supervisor and mentor regarding the disparity between the manner in which older people were portrayed in society and the way in which they view their own aging experiences. Six women, aged 65 years and older, within the Bloemfontein area (the capital of the Free State Province in South Africa) were recruited to take part in this study.

A qualitative research approach is used to explore the stories the women shared of their aging experiences in in-depth interviews. An interpretive sociological approach, which incorporates phenomenology, existential sociology, and reflexive sociology, is chosen for the purpose of this study. The narrative accounts of their stories are constructed in terms of themes that emerged, linking it with the literature. Role changes during their life course are found to influence who they have become. The dissertation starts off by introducing aging as a phenomenon before reviewing the concept of aging and components such as, society's view of aging, retirement, social relationships, living arrangements and spirituality. Identity and the changing roles during the life course of a women is conceptualized as means of further understanding of the aging process before introducing the ontological and epistemological foundation on which the investigative process is based.

The narratives of the older women in the study portray a holistic picture of aging. Contrary to older women being portrayed as frail, dependent individuals in society, the analysis reveals that they view aging as a positive process. They have clear ideas and expectations of what they want from life. It affords them the freedom to utilize their time in a manner that pleases them without having the responsibility of having to take a spouse into consideration, or to

care for children. Despite living on a marginal financial budget, they construct themselves as women having close links with family and friends, being active members in their churches and societies, and as independent women who enjoy the freedom of living life on their own terms and within their means. Being older brings with it, for them, confidence, self-awareness, and the freedom to make their own choices.

Opsomming

Die doel van hierdie studie was om die verouderingservarings van die ouer wit Engelssprekende vroue in sentraal Suid-Afrika te verken. Die aanvanklike motivering vir hierdie studie het gespruit vanuit 'n gesprek wat ek gehad het met my toesighouer en mentor oor die verskille tussen die wyse waarop ouer mense in die gemeenskap uitgebeeld word, en die manier waarop hulle hul eie verouderingservarings sien. Ses vroue, in die ouderdomsgroep, 65 jaar en ouer, is binne die Bloemfontein-area (die hoofstad van die Vrystaat Provinsie in Suid-Afrika) gewerf om deel te neem aan hierdie studie.

'n Kwalitatiewe navorsingsbenadering word gebruik om die stories te verken, deur in-diepte onderhoude te voer met die vroue wat hulle verouderingservarings deel. 'n Interpretatiewe sosiologiese benadering, wat die fenomenologie, eksistensiële, en refleksiewe sosiologie insluit, is gekies vir die doel van hierdie studie. Die narratiewe verhaling van hulle ervarings is gekonstrueer in terme van temas wat na vore gekom het en is gekoppel aan bestaande literatuur. Daar is bevind dat rolveranderinge tydens hulle lewensloop 'n invloed het op wie hulle geword het. Die verhandeling begin met die bekendstelling van veroudering as 'n verskynsel, voordat die konsep van veroudering, sowel as komponente soos die samelewing se siening van veroudering, aftrede, sosiale verhoudings, verblyfsreëlings, en spiritualiteit, verken word. Identiteit en die veranderende rolle tydens die lewensloop van 'n vrou word gekonseptualiseer as middele tot verdere begrip van die verouderingsproses alvorens die ontologiese an epistemologiese grondslag waarop die ondersoekende proses gebaseer is, verreken word.

Die narratiewe verhale van die ouer vroue in die studie beeld 'n holistiese prentjie van veroudering uit. In teenstelling met hoe ouer vroue uitgebeeld word as verswakte, afhanklike individue in die samelewing, toon die ontleding dat hulle veroudering as 'n positiewe proses

sien. Hulle het duidelike idees en verwagtinge van wat hulle wil hê in die lewe. Dit bied aan hulle die vryheid om hulle tyd te benut soos dit hulle behaag, sonder die verantwoordelikheid van 'n gade, of om versorging van kinders in ag te neem. Ten spyte daarvan dat hulle op 'n beperkte finansiële begroting lewe, konstrueer hulle hulself as vroue wat noue bande het met familie en vriende, as aktiewe lede in hulle kerke en gemeenskappe, en as onafhanklike vroue wat die vryheid geniet om 'n lewe op hulle eie terme en binne hulle eie vermoë te benut. Vir die navorsingsdeelnemers bring dit vertroue, bewussyn van die self, en die vryheid om hulle eie keuses te maak.