

University of Nevada, Reno

**Valued Identities and Aging Experiences
in a Diverse Sample of Middle-Aged Women**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Social Psychology

by

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We recommend that the dissertation
prepared under our supervision by

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Abstract

Aging has been consistently found to carry negative meanings in Western societies, particularly for women. The goal of this study was to investigate aging experiences in a diverse sample of middle-aged women, as well as to explore the possible links between those experiences and women's valued identities. In general, it was expected that women would experience aging more favorably if they had opportunities to maintain or achieve the identities that they value as they get older, and that differences in women's valued identities would translate into diverging aging experiences among participants occupying various social locations. In addition, circumstantial factors such as relationship status and quality or type of employment were also expected to influence feelings about aging among the women for whom those aspects of life are significant.

Previous writings have often linked women's feelings of age-related loss with their diminishing sexual attractiveness. However, much of the existing literature reflects the views of White, middle-class women and has focused on their heterosexual relationships rather than on other factors that may make aging more difficult or more rewarding. In research on African American and Latina women, as well as poor women, identities situated in other areas such as motherhood, extended family relationships, or religion have been found to be central, and those identities may be associated with different types of aging experiences.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-one women between the ages of 40 and 65, including Caucasian and Latina women with various social class standings. The interviews focused on women's valued identities and their feelings about aging. A brief demographic questionnaire was also administered prior to

each interview. The qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic framework analysis approach.

Confirming the research expectations, women's feelings about aging were frequently related to their valued identities. Further, several ethnic and social class patterns emerged with regard to participants' most central identities, although investment in heterosexual relationships did not vary based on women's social location. Even more surprisingly, the vast majority of the participants did not bring up or were not seriously bothered by loss of sexual value, regardless of their important identities, background characteristics, or life circumstances. Thus, even though the (primarily psychological) gains associated with aging were often juxtaposed against various concerns about issues such as illness or discrimination, the participants' responses contradicted the expectation that changes in physical appearance and their implications for heterosexual attractiveness would be perceived catastrophically, at least by some of the women. The implications of this study are discussed in relation to the existing literature, and considering its possible limitations.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

During the past several decades, feminist authors have become increasingly concerned about the pervasive devaluation of older women in Western societies (e.g., Sontag, 1972/1997; de Beauvoir, 1974; Greer, 1992; Friedan, 1993; Steinem, 1994; Browne, 1998; Calasanti & Slevin, 2006; Barrett & Robbins, 2008; Hurd Clarke, 2011). These authors have pointed out that women's aging is accompanied by a marked decline in their perceived social value, which is manifested through a decrease in women's desirability as sexual partners and, at a more general level, through social invisibility. Moreover, perceptions of older women tend to be more negative than perceptions of older men, whose social value often increases with age as they accumulate resources and gain a higher professional status.

A considerable number of feminists have described aging as a difficult experience for women, and some confessed their own struggles with getting older in a society that devalues older women (e.g., Harris, 1975; Melamed, 1983; Hurd Clarke, 2011). Although a few studies have evidenced that women's aging experiences are not more negative than men's across all domains investigated (McMullin & Cairney, 2004; Miner-Rubino, Winter, & Stewart, 2004), researchers have consistently found gender differences in people's evaluations of their exterior looks, as women are generally more preoccupied with age-related changes in appearance (Halliwell & Dittmer, 2003; Oberg & Tornstam, 1999). This finding is hardly surprising, given the emphasis placed on women's physical beauty and the narrowness of contemporary beauty standards. At the same time, racial minority women such as African Americans have been found to have less anxiety about age-related changes in physical attractiveness compared to White women (Barrett &

Robbins, 2008), suggesting that discussions about “women” as a purportedly unitary category may be inadequate for analyzing perceptions of aging among women situated in different structural locations.

Thus, although the feminist literature has been successful in questioning the negative connotations of women’s aging, one limitation of much of this work stems from its White, middle-class bias. Because many of the influential texts on women’s aging have been written by highly educated, White feminists who did not address differences based on social location, they implicitly silence the potentially divergent experiences of minority women. For example, the assertion that young women are valued for their beauty is based on the assumption of their Whiteness, considering that non-White women are often portrayed as unattractive within mainstream discourses, regardless of their age (Hill Collins, 2000). Similarly, the notion that men acquire resources and status over the lifespan is derived from a middle-class view of their professional trajectories, which may not be applicable to other categories of men. One goal of the present research is to correct this White, middle-class bias by adding women with diverse racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds to the analysis of women’s aging experiences.

For White, middle-class women, age-related changes in physical appearance appear to be problematic primarily because they involve a decline in heterosexual attractiveness, and therefore diminished opportunities for maintaining or forming close relationships with men (Sontag, 1972/1997). The nature of this loss is consistent with the observation that for many White, middle-class women, intimate relationships with men are a defining component of their identities (Rich, 1980). Thus, aging can be expected to be painful for women who aspire to have sexual connections with men, yet find their

possibilities restricted by their changing looks. On the other hand, the literature on racial/ethnic minority and lower-class/poor women suggests that heterosexual relationships are not regarded as essential by women from all social locations. Instead, some studies have shown that relationships with children, extended family, or God can serve as primary sources of identity for Black, Latina, and poor women (Beyene, Becker, & Mayen, 2002; Black, 1999; Hill Collins, 2000). Such relationships may be less impacted by aging than heterosexual connections, given that they are not conditioned by women's physical beauty and youth. Consequently, a fundamental question addressed in this study is whether women's aging experiences are related to the identities that are important to them and the extent to which those identities are impacted by aging. Further, because the sources of women's valued identities have been found to vary based on social location, it is expected that any variations in women's aging experiences resulting from their endorsement of different identities are also linked to background characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and social class.

One challenge for a White, educated researcher investigating the experiences of minority women consists of detaching herself from her privileged stance and representing non-dominant experiences, rather than her own views. This objective can be hard to accomplish not only at the methodological level, given the inherent power differentials between researcher and participants, but also at the theoretical level of developing the literature review and formulating the research questions. The present literature review begins with an outline of theories and studies written by and about White, middle-class women's aging, followed by a largely speculative analysis of minority women's experiences. Therefore, I acknowledge the inherent biases conveyed by the structure of

the review itself, as well as the difficulty of developing questions and expectations about minority women that are not constructed in relation to the much better researched lives of White, middle-class women.

Another structural characteristic of this theoretical outline concerns the artificial separation of minority women into distinct categories (e.g., Blacks, Latinas, poor women, etc) when discussing their valued identities and (potential) aging experiences. Although this separation serves the analytic purpose of examining the specificities of each group's relationship to aging, it may also obscure the well-established intersections between these statuses. Social categories such as race/ethnicity and class, which represent bases for women's oppression, are always intertwined and form what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) termed a "matrix of domination." In other words, the exploitation of individuals based on gender, race, or class does not operate in isolation, but instead these statuses contribute together to each woman's identities and to the degree to which she is dominated or is in a position to dominate others (hooks, 2005). Therefore, race, ethnicity, and social class must be analyzed in conjunction to understand the experiences of minority women, and all observations about specific minority groups presented in this paper need to be viewed as guiding principles meant to facilitate the understanding of women's complex social locations and identities, rather than as discrete categories of experience.

Chapter 2: Women's Aging in Western Culture

The overwhelmingly negative connotations attributed to aging in the Western world have been well documented in the gerontology literature (e.g., Biggs, 2004). In many societies including the United States, the media and other powerful discourses actively support the association of youth with positive features like beauty and health, whereas aging has become a symbol of failure, to be avoided at all costs (Featherstone, 1991).

Several authors have suggested that the negative views on aging in many contemporary societies are related to the current emphasis on modern technological advances. Given the nature of technological progress, people's knowledge tends to become devalued as new information rapidly emerges, and so does their value as human beings as they age (de Beauvoir, 1972; Fry, 1980). Moreover, in the present "information age," individuals' adoption of technology is commonly regarded as a prerequisite to adjustment both at work and in the home (Czaja & Sharit, 1998; Selwyn, 2004). Older adults are generally less likely to be highly involved in the use of technology (Selwyn *et al.*, 2003), to perceive comfort, efficacy and control over it (Czaja & Sharit), and their decisions to adopt new technology tend to differ from those of younger individuals (Morris & Venkatesh, 2000). Although it is not clear to what extent these differences represent outcomes of the aging process or cohort effects (Morris & Venkatesh), aging is often equated with disengagement from the areas of life deemed most important in a technology based society.

Another factor that has been invoked to explain negative perceptions of aging is "consumer culture" (Featherstone, 1991). From this perspective, the capitalist goals of

various industries (e.g., the beauty industry) are well served when large segments of the population embark on the journey of fighting the physical signs of aging and thus become the market for products that promise to help individuals achieve this impossible mission.

Although older Americans in general tend to be thought of in unflattering terms, representations of aging women are particularly negative, as they reflect the combined effects of ageism and sexism. In her now classic article on the “double standard of aging,” Susan Sontag (1972/1997) pointed out the specificities of women’s aging in a culture that values them primarily for their physical attractiveness. Sontag powerfully described women’s aging as “a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification” (p. 20), emphasizing the decline in women’s value as potential sexual partners as they age. A similar account of women’s aging was offered by Simone de Beauvoir (1972, 1974), who also noted the importance of physical beauty for women’s sexual attractiveness, and the justifiable fears that haunt women even before they actually become disqualified. Building upon her famous conceptualization of women as “the other,” de Beauvoir’s work on older women depicted them as “twice the other” in Western culture (Banner, 1992). When women’s bodies no longer convey youth and beauty as a result of aging, the women themselves come to be regarded as morally responsible for their own decay and denied access to privileges such as male sexual attention.

The double standard of aging hypothesis formulated by Sontag (1972/1997) has been empirically supported in many studies, including recent ones. With regard to gender-based age preferences in heterosexual relationships, authors have consistently found that men seek younger women as sexual partners (Buss, 2006; Hayes, 1995; Silverthorne & Quinsey, 2000). Teuscher and Teuscher’s (2007) slightly more ambiguous

results revealed a stronger youth bias among male participants than among females when rating pictures of potential sexual partners, whether heterosexual or homosexual. Looking at evaluations of younger versus older women, Perlini, Bertolissi, and Lind (1999) found that male judges rated an older woman as less socially desirable than a young woman, even when both were physically attractive. Deusch, Zalenski, and Clark (2006) asked college-aged and elderly participants to rate photographs of women and men of various ages and found that evaluations of women became more negative as they aged compared to evaluations of men. A similar study conducted by Berman, O’Nan and Floyd (1981) also partially confirmed the double standard of aging hypothesis, with male and female participants situated in group settings (all-male, all-female, and mixed) judging middle-aged men as more attractive than middle-aged women. Interestingly, attractiveness ratings were reversed when evaluations were made privately, and middle-aged women received more favorable evaluations than middle-aged men from participants of both genders. Berman et al. invoked participants’ efforts to follow traditional norms when publicly expressing judgments and suggested that the pressure to conform to norms may be diminished in private settings. These findings remain nevertheless intriguing, given that individuals tend to internalize cultural ideals of beauty and to evaluate their own and others’ appearances according to those standards (Bordo, 1993).

According to Naomi Wolf (1991, p. 10), the devaluation of older women (as well as other women who do not conform to culturally mandated looks) is related to “a violent backlash against feminism,” which emerged as a result of women’s liberation in many areas of life. The second wave of the women’s movement brought about significant improvements in arenas such as education, paid work, and the attainment of legal rights.

Nevertheless, as Wolf remarked, contemporary women feel worse about their bodies than their “unliberated grandmothers” did. The pervasive discourses that prescribe women’s looks, which have been labeled by Wolf as “the beauty myth” function to prevent women’s advancement in arenas in which they have otherwise been granted the premises for success. The controlling images of feminine beauty help turn much of women’s attention and energies to monitoring and disciplining their bodies, thereby preventing their achievements in the public domains of work and politics. Moreover, because aging is seen as incompatible with images of valued womanhood, the beauty myth serves to disqualify those women who achieve power as they grow older by denying their femininity. In fact, Wolf has argued that women’s attainment of power as they age is precisely the reason older women have come to be seen as particularly unbeautiful during the last few decades.

Considering the great symbolic value of women’s looks such as markers of femininity and sexual attractiveness, as well as the fact that aging is accompanied by obvious physical changes, it is not surprising that the body has constituted a major theme in feminist discussions of women’s aging. I will further explore feminist conceptualizations of the body, as well as the contemporary emphasis on women’s looks as a central source of their identity. Although Oberg and Tornstam (1999) have pointed out the distinctions between a person’s “looks” and her “body,” the body literature that I review sometimes invokes these terms interchangeably. Using the word body when referring to a woman’s looks may be misleading, as the former notion encompasses aspects related to both functionality and exterior appearance, whereas looks only include perceivable features of the body. However, in the context of consumer culture

(Featherstone, 1991) this distinction may not be as meaningful as the technical definition of the terms would suggest. Given the elevated status of looks as a symbol of individuals' virtues, differentiating between outside appearances and less visible characteristics (whether physical or psychological) may be difficult for people accustomed to evaluating others and themselves on the basis of external characteristics.

Women's Aging and the Body

Various authors (e.g., Brittan & Maynard, 1984; Cixous, 1975/1986) have observed that in a Western cultural context dominated by dichotomous contrasts, women are defined primarily in terms of their corporeal existence, whereas men are viewed as exponents of the more highly valued spheres of intellect and spirituality. These authors have postulated that women are symbolically identified with "nature," as opposed to men, who are identified with "culture." Because the relationship between nature and culture is generally constructed as a hierarchical one in which the project of culture is to conquer, dominate, or tame nature, one consequence of associating women with nature is to justify their subordination by men, as representatives of culture.

Ortner (1974) has attributed the universal association between women and nature to women's physiology (e.g., menstruation, childbirth) and women's social roles (e.g., childbearing), which are both seen as rooted in nature. However, she has challenged simplistic approaches that view women as being completely identified with nature, and argued that their participation in cultural processes is recognized, at least to some extent, by contemporary societies. For instance, in their roles as caregivers, women play a major role in the socialization of future generations and thus "perform [...] conversions from nature to culture" (p. 80). Nevertheless, Ortner has argued that these conversions are

regarded as lower-level than men's cultural projects, thereby supporting the perception of women as closer to, if not entirely identified with, nature. Regardless of their precise ways of conceptualizing the metaphorical associations between women and nature and between men and culture, many feminist analysts of the body have exposed the problematic outcomes of such dichotomous and hierarchical thinking.

Theoretical conceptualizations of the body have sometimes reproduced the distinction between the body as a presumed natural entity and the cultural meanings that are inscribed upon it. However, mainstream feminist understandings have largely shifted towards a view of the body as itself culturally constituted, rather than as an entity that exists independently of and in opposition to constraining cultural forces (Bordo, 1993; Foucault, 1980; Gatens, 1995; Grosz, 1994). Thus, the body has increasingly been viewed as a manifestation of the norms, ideologies and corresponding practices that characterize specific social and historical contexts. An illustrative example is that of gender-specific practices (e.g., dieting, exercise, make-up), which do not simply alter bodies, but create what come to be regarded as female and male bodies.

As a manifestation of culture, the body also represents a site of social control (Bordo, 1993), in that it is constituted through practices aimed at achieving various socially acceptable goals. These practices range from physical activities performed in work environments, to actions designed to produce socially desirable looks. Although the social control function of the body is not a new phenomenon, a specifically modern feature of bodily social control involves what Foucault (1980, p. 155) described as the "system of surveillance" for disciplining bodies. This system does not necessarily involve physical violence or material constraints, but instead is based upon people's

internalization of socially normative appearances and practices. Bordo has pointed out the homogenizing and normalizing functions of media images. According to her, representations that depart from the Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual ideal are largely excluded from the mainstream media, and the homogenized images “function as models against which the self continually measures, judges, ‘disciplines’, and ‘corrects’ itself” (Bordo, pp. 24-25). Thus, the internalization of cultural standards functions as a controlling gaze, and individuals learn to monitor and discipline their own bodies even in the absence of apparent outside pressures.

Featherstone (1991, 2010) has argued that the transformation of the body into a site of social control is closely linked with the marketing interests of consumer culture. According to Featherstone (1991), outside appearances have gained powerful meanings in capitalist societies, as they are commonly assumed to reflect people’s inner characteristics. Consumer culture has brought about a specific relationship between the self and the body, in which the self is assumed to be expressed *through* the body. The qualities of the self, including morality, are conveyed through the body’s appearance, display, and the careful management of impressions. Because the body has come to stand for the self as an outside representation, the rewards for improving the body have expanded from an enhanced appearance to the attainment of a more marketable self. Importantly, the value of the body as self-expression is highest when it approaches idealized standards of youth and beauty, whereas bodies that depart from such norms may signify various personal deficiencies such as laziness, lack of willpower, or moral failure.

Bodily qualities are increasingly seen as plastic in consumer culture, thereby sustaining the belief that achieving the desirable body (and, therefore, projected self) is

realistic, as long as the right amount of effort is invested in this endeavor. As Gimlin (2000, p. 80) phrased it, the body has become “a primary symbol of identity,” with the assumption being that its capacity for change is endless. Considering the high value of physical appearance as “a passport to all that is good in life” (Featherstone, 1991, p. 186), it is not surprising that many individuals invest significant resources in the maintenance of their bodies. Featherstone (1991, 2010) has further remarked that women are the primary victims of incessant body-work and self-scrutiny, given that physical beauty has been constructed as an essential component of femininity. Therefore, the deterioration of the aging body is especially damaging to women’s selves and identities.

Given the high stakes of maintaining culturally valued looks, women often go to extreme degrees to achieve those looks. The extent to which women in this culture engage in body work, often compulsively, has been widely recognized – see, for example, the extensive literature on dieting and eating disturbances (Caskey, 1985; Chernin, 1985). Many authors have investigated and interpreted the various activities in which women engage to achieve appearances that are socially valued in the Western world. In addition to acknowledging the daily practices through which most women discipline their bodies (such as dieting, exercising, using make-up, night creams or moisturizers), there appears to be a fascination among researchers with analyzing the meanings of plastic surgery for women.

Although aesthetic surgery may seem an extreme and qualitatively different procedure from other routine activities, Brownmiller (1984) has argued that it is merely a logical extension of women’s daily beauty-related practices. Reliance on more drastic procedures to alter one’s looks can in fact be seen as highly consistent with the

“transformation” themes (Featherstone, 2010) endorsed as cultural ideals in the United States, where the makeover can involve such varied dimensions as turning poverty into richness or fatness into thinness. Bordo (1993), Stewart (1998) and Gimlin (2002) have also shared the view of aesthetic surgery as a “normal,” understandable practice in a context in which its results allow women to be perceived by others and by themselves as valuable. As Bordo argued, women who decide to take the risks associated with plastic surgery do so not because of having become the passive victims of media norms, but because they understand how those norms shape others’ perceptions. This view also transpires from Stewart’s (1998) research on breast implants, which revealed how women’s decisions regarding surgical alterations of their bodies are made within a cultural context that severely limits the ways in which they can become and remain valuable in others’, as well as their own, eyes. Gimlin’s (2000, 2002) research on cosmetic surgery and other areas of body improvement similarly revealed that body work tends to be perceived by women as work on the self. Although some authors’ postmodern interpretations of aesthetic surgery depict these practices as mechanisms that help women inscribe active sexuality onto their bodies (e.g., Holliday & Sanchez Taylor, 2006), the general trend in the literature is to acknowledge the constraining cultural discourses that shape women’s decisions to resort to surgical alterations of their bodies. In fact, several recent studies (Brooks, 2010; Hurd Clarke, 2011; Smirnova, 2012) have examined the powerful messages sent to women by the ever growing commercialization of aesthetic anti-aging surgeries and technologies, which are increasingly medicalized and defined as cures for purported diseases, rather than as optional procedures.

Media messages that advise individuals to take responsibility for their appearance also convey a system of images according to which beauty is synonymous with youth, slenderness, and other characteristics that are largely unattainable for most women, even as they engage in extensive body work (Brownmiller, 1984). Consequently, it is not surprising that body dissatisfaction has become a “normative discontent” (Cash & Pruzinky, cited in Cash & Henry, 1995, p. 25) among American women. Because a youthful appearance is seen as a necessary, although not sufficient requirement for female beauty and therefore acceptable femininity (Brownmiller), older women are almost by definition excluded from the culturally valued picture. The belief in a perfectly malleable body is reflected in the ways in which the mass media encourage women to resist aging, perhaps even more blatantly than in the case of other undesirable outcomes. As Cruikshank (2003) remarked, “anti-aging” is a very common label for commercial products, which would be unacceptable to display for denigrating other social groups such as ethnic minorities. Thus, in today’s climate of political correctness it would be inconceivable to advertise a product as “anti-black” (even though products aimed at achieving a “whiter” look certainly exist on the market), whereas many cosmetics are explicitly touted to reverse or hide aging in contemporary commercials.

Feminist authors have acknowledged and challenged the difficulties surrounding women’s aging in Western culture. However, feminists’ appropriation of aging as an area of study is relatively new, and it is unclear to what extent embracing a feminist approach can help women experience aging more positively. In the following, I discuss the emergence of theorizing about women’s aging within the feminist literature and explore the relationship between feminist identity and women’s experiences with their own aging.

Women's Aging and Feminism

The feminist literature that emerged during the second wave of the women's movement has been criticized for its excessive focus on young women's concerns (e.g., objectification of women's bodies, abortion, and contraception), and for its failure to address the problems encountered by women as they age (Brennan, 2005). The early omission of aging from the feminist agenda has been attributed to both theoretical and emotional factors (Cruikshank, 2003).

Cruikshank (2003) has suggested that one theoretical reason women's studies originally failed to theorize aging was the lack of desire on the part of feminists to overemphasize bodily aspects. The development and heavy reliance upon the concept of "gender" as a social category as opposed to "sex," a presumably biological category, signaled a desire on the part of feminists to move beyond biologically deterministic understandings to a view of women's oppression as rooted in cultural and social-structural dimensions. Thus, social constructionism became a powerful theoretical tool for refuting biologically-driven claims regarding the inevitability of women's subordination and for envisaging alternative social arrangements. Despite the progressive character of the social constructionist paradigm, its supporters were sometimes uncomfortable acknowledging the biological components of the phenomena they studied (John Money's (1975) now-controversial sex-reassignment interventions are an extreme example of exclusive social constructionist endorsement). Because aging involves undeniable changes in people's bodies, it was perhaps more difficult for second wave feminist theorists to incorporate both social constructionism and biological changes into models of women's aging. In spite of the initial resistance to grapple with such

complexities, this theoretical barrier has been largely overcome by contemporary feminist theorists of aging, who commonly acknowledge that it is culture that “determines the meanings we ascribe to physical change” (Cruikshank, p. 175).

A more personal and emotional reason for overlooking women’s aging may have been related to second wave feminists’ fears of their own aging, which could have prevented this topic from becoming a promising subject for study (Cruikshank, 2003). Unlike the middle-aged and older activists of the first wave of the women’s movement, who were less constricted by the social roles of wife and mother compared to their younger contemporaries, the typical second wave activists were younger women who had already gained considerable freedoms as a result of previous feminist efforts. Although these feminists appear to have been oblivious to or afraid of the topic of women’s aging during the second wave of the women’s movement, some of the prominent second wave activists incorporated issues of aging in their work once they got older and experienced the combined consequences of sexism and ageism (Brennan, 2005). Thus, the increased interest in aging among feminists during the past few decades seems to be related to their own struggles as older women (Garner, 1999). Interestingly, even feminists such as Betty Friedan who were older during the second wave focused on other topics during that period (although Friedan did write a book about aging in 1993), suggesting that the youth bias of the movement, combined with the theoretical orientation outlined above, may have silenced older activists’ concerns about their aging. On the other hand, following Naomi Wolf’s (1991) argument that the controlling images of femininity have become more powerful in response to the second wave of the women’s movement, it is possible

that aging was experienced as less problematic by women during the 1960s and 70s than during the following decades.

Combining autobiographical elements with data from other middle-aged or older women that they interviewed, many feminists have recognized aging as a process that has the potential to trigger major identity crises in women's lives. More specifically, authors such as Betty Friedan (1963), Janet Harris (1975), Elissa Melamed (1983), and Germaine Greer (1992) have positioned middle-age as a time when women's well-established identities as wives and mothers are likely to be threatened by transitions such as a divorce or children moving out of the home, which can leave them with no obvious social roles to draw upon for life purpose and meaning. Furthermore, given mainstream cultural messages that require women to be or, at least, look perpetually young, middle-age has also been described as a time when women become socially and sexually invisible, a particularly harsh predicament if their previous identities and roles have vanished.

In a more recent series of studies conducted between 1997 and 2007, Laura Hurd Clarke (2011) has found that middle-aged, older, and elderly women (the majority of whom were White, middle-class, heterosexual, and Canadian-born) generally portrayed aging as a difficult experience, especially with regard to the loss of physical attractiveness. While there were some women who resisted the messages of "anti-aging culture," the youth bias of the mass media, combined with the medicalization and widespread promotion of various cosmetic procedures designed to fight aging, was powerfully reflected in most women's accounts. Not surprisingly, Mary White Stewart (2013) has similarly talked about the sense of loss that is bound to plague aging women in a culture in which they are valued primarily in terms of their appearance. Thus,

emphasizing the social context that defines women's worth in terms of their youth and reproductive functions, feminists writing about aging during the 1970s, 80s, 90s, as well as in recent years have agreed that middle-age may lead to a problematic existence for women who are constrained by and internalize society's perceptions of them.

Yet, some of these authors have not viewed middle-aged women's lapse into a meaningless life as inevitable. Greer (1992), for example, has described old age as a time when women have the option to abandon the oppressive patriarchal norms that governed most of their lives and thereby achieve authenticity, serenity, and freedom. Contrary to society's negative views of older women and defying the lack of readily available identities (e.g., mother to dependent children, sex object to men) to draw upon in middle-age and beyond, she claimed that women can, through their own willpower and determination, resist cultural prejudices and live accomplished, meaningful lives. As older women are gradually dismissed from their previous caretaking roles and become socially and sexually invisible, they can arguably take advantage of this disengagement by finally focusing on themselves and relinquishing the oppressive ideologies that keep women in subservient roles during their earlier years.

Much like Greer (1992), for whom the older woman's invisibility can be liberating and may enable her to live for herself rather than in the service of others, Gloria Steinem (1994) has written about the freedom of self-expression and the potential for radicalization conferred to women by aging. Thus, Steinem has also viewed older women's invisibility as offering new and often unexpected possibilities in terms of self-discovery and feminist activism. Similarly, Dianne Garner (1999, p. 3) has concluded that

for her, “to be old is to be myself,” despite the ways in which patriarchy may classify old women as “invisible and powerless.”

However, other feminists such as Harris (1975), Melamed (1983), and Stewart (2013) have conveyed a less optimistic understanding of women’s aging, by acknowledging the difficulties in transcending the culturally dominant practices of devaluing older women and not embracing the end of sexuality as freedom. Despite their recognition of certain benefits and freedoms that sometimes accompany women’s aging, these authors’ autobiographical confessions illustrate that middle-aged and older women may experience the prejudicial views attached to them in Western societies even in the presence of a feminist background. In fact, as Cruikshank (2003) remarked, older women appear to almost unavoidably internalize negative messages about their own inferiority and learn to see themselves through the eyes of the oppressor, which coincides with the normative societal views. As Pearsall’s (1997) poignantly titled book “The Other within Us” reveals, women whose youth was marked by the second wave of the women’s movement in The United States and Europe are facing the greatest feminist challenge when trying to resist the devaluation of their aging faces and bodies. Despite having actively opposed oppressive beauty ideals earlier in their lives, the true challenge consists of becoming an older woman and positioning oneself in relation to the invisibility and losses associated with this status. Thus, Greer’s (1992) idyllic view of the older woman as content with her social invisibility and immersed in her own meaningful projects appears hard to accomplish according to authors who followed Sontag’s (1972/1997) naming of the double standard of aging with in-depth analyses meant to reveal its often devastating impact on women.

As illustrated by these diverging points of view, a feminist identity is unlikely to constitute a universal protective factor against Western women's negative experiences of aging. Although some authors have drawn upon their feminist values in pursuing detachment from ageist and sexist cultural norms, for other feminists increased awareness of the double standard of aging seems to make their own aging even more problematic. The observation that a feminist identity does not necessarily protect against aging concerns may be somewhat surprising, considering that a feminist identity and nontraditional gender attitudes have been found to protect women from negative evaluations of their bodies as well as from problematic eating behaviors (Cash, Ancis, & Strachan, 1997; Guille, 1999; Snyder & Hasbrouck, 1996; Tiggerman & Stevens, 1999). However, the feminist literature on body image is itself less contradictory and consistently emphasizes the need to abandon oppressive beauty ideals and the behaviors meant to achieve those ideals. With regard to the complex experience of aging, there has been disagreement on such basic topics as what could count as a positive aging experience for women (e.g., abandoning oppressive sexuality versus continuing to be viewed as sexual), thus making it improbable that endorsement of a generic feminist identity could serve as a tool for resisting the double standard of aging in the same way that it helps diminish body image concerns.

Feminist interest in aging has resulted in the emergence of new areas of study such as "feminist gerontology" (Garner, 1999), as well as in the application of concepts previously reserved for gender analyses to the understanding of women's aging. One such example is Biggs's (2004) appropriation of the idea of gender identity as performance (Butler, 1990/1999) in his proposed framework of aging identity as

masquerade. Inspired by Judith Butler's conceptualization of gender identities as constituted through either gender-normative or subversive practices, Biggs has argued that aging identities are similarly achieved through the display of acts deemed either age-appropriate or inappropriate in any given context. Because age identities are often created through the concealment of "socially unacceptable aspects of aging" (Biggs, p. 53), a considerable portion of people's age performance can be viewed as a masquerade meant to achieve a desirable self.

Regardless of their perspectives, one common feature of many of the above-mentioned feminist texts is that they largely reflect White, middle-class points of view. Perhaps the most blatant class bias can be found in the work of Friedan (1993), who pointed out a contradiction between the overwhelmingly negative societal stereotypes regarding old age and the growth experienced by many elderly people. Friedan described old age as a time of surprising vitality and adventure, which allows individuals to give up certain activities and embark on other exciting projects or ways of working and loving. Although Friedan's contribution in refusing to conceptualize women as merely victims of the aging process is well recognized, the generalizability of her claims has been questioned because of her focus on educated, sometimes famous women (Browne, 1998).

A similar class bias has been pointed out with regard to de Beauvoir's writings on women's aging. Acknowledging that older women are no longer regarded as useful in their nurturing roles, de Beauvoir has decried the fact that older women's freedom comes at a time in their lives when they are also unlikely to be involved in other meaningful endeavors. According to Brennan (2005, p. 28), de Beauvoir's understanding of "projects" as necessarily "all consuming and socially important" overlooks not only

many of the mundane tasks that can potentially be experienced as fulfilling by older women, but also renders uneducated, lower-class women as incapable of sustaining important and absorbing activities in later life. This White, middle-class bias that characterizes feminist conceptualizations of aging often permeates discussions about lay women's aging experiences as well, as illustrated in the following section.

Women's Aging Experiences

Despite the well-established double standard in cultural evaluations of women's and men's aging, people's actual experiences of aging do not always reflect those overarching gender differences. Although some studies have found that women experience aging more negatively than men (especially in terms of concerns about their bodies or looks), the conclusions of such research are generally complex and do not allow for an interpretation in which gender actually predicts self-evaluations. For example, McMullin and Cairney (2004) found that self-esteem tends to decrease with age in both women and men beginning in adolescence, and women have lower levels of self-esteem than men in all age groups. These results were based on a nationally representative sample of the Canadian population aged twelve and older. While McMullin and Cairney's findings are consistent with the more general observation that older people are devalued in Western societies, they do not indicate that women's self-esteem is more heavily impacted by aging than is men's.

Other researchers who failed to find gender differences in people's aging experiences reported a general enhancement associated with aging in several psychological areas. In a retrospective study involving women and men in their sixties, Miner-Rubino, Winter, and Stewart (2004, p. 1599) examined 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 about aging (“the popular conception of aging as a preoccupation with ‘time left,’ the approach of death, and decreased physical strength and attractiveness”) at different times in participants’ lives – during their twenties, forties, and sixties. Overall, both men and women reported higher levels of identity certainty and confident power at more advanced ages, even though men scored higher on these variables. The authors concluded that the subjective experience of aging appeared to be largely positive for both genders, although concern about aging also increased with age among both women and men.

Differences between women’s and men’s experiences of aging have been detected in studies that focused on aging anxiety or on people’s concerns about changes in their looks over time. Such studies have found that not only are women more likely to be worried about the deterioration of their looks as a result of aging, but also that this fear haunts them long before the physical signs of aging become obvious. Authors such as Browne (1998) and Slevin (2006) have decried the aging anxiety instilled in women at early ages by cultural norms that devalue older women. Empirical studies about fear of aging have generally confirmed that women have higher levels of aging anxiety compared to men, particularly with regard to changes in physical appearance, and that this fear tends to be highest among younger women (Abramson & Silverstein, 2006; Cantwell & Barrett, 2006; Cummings, Kropf, & DeWeaver, 2000; Lynch, 2000; McConatha, Schnell, Volkwein, Riley, & Leach, 2003). Exceptions to this trend include a

small number of studies that have found no gender differences (Kafer, Rakowski, Lachman, & Hickey, 1980), or have reported greater fears among men (Lasher & Faulkender, 1993). The methodology of these latter studies has been questioned by Barrett and Robbins (2008), who pointed out the smaller, nonrandom nature of the samples surveyed.

Halliwell and Dittmer's (2003) qualitative investigation also revealed gender differences in attitudes towards one's aging body. The authors found that men were predominantly preoccupied by deteriorations in their bodies' functionality, whereas women were mostly concerned about their appearance, as the double standard of aging perspective would suggest. Oberg and Tornstam's (1999) quantitative survey involving Swedish participants similarly revealed that physical appearance was more important for women than for men in all of the surveyed age groups (ranging from 20 to 85 years old), and that women were more worried about their looks deteriorating as a result of aging. However, satisfaction with one's body did not decline with age, and in fact it increased among women. One explanation for the apparent inconsistency between the perceived importance of youthful looks and the body satisfaction reported by older women is that looks and body may have been viewed as different constructs by the participants, and therefore rated independently (Oberg & Tornstam). More specifically, looks may refer exclusively to the outside, visible parts of the body, whereas the body encompasses both looks and functionality.

Even more positive outcomes were revealed by Wilcox's (1997) study, which found no support for the double standard of aging in the investigation of self-perceptions of the body among women and men between the ages of 20 and 80. The author found no

effects on body attitudes that could be related to age, gender, or the interaction between age and gender. One caveat is that the construct assessed in this study was global body satisfaction, without distinguishing between perceptions of exterior looks versus the body. Such global measures often yield inconsistent results with regard to gender differences, as illustrated by Oberg and Tornstam's (1999) research. An alternative explanation proposed by Wilcox is that older women's detachment from the pressures of youth might result from their realization that cultural ideals are increasingly unattainable for women as they age. This realization may lead older women to be more accepting of their bodies than younger women, who are still attempting to achieve the culturally idealized looks.

On a similarly hopeful note, Jones (1994) found that the process of aging can sometimes result in increased acceptance of oneself and of other older women, subverting dominant understandings of aging as catastrophic and finding alternative ways to affirm oneself. In general, Jones described the onset of menopause and its aging connotations as a "complex and contradictory" (p. 58) experience, carrying meanings of both loss and increased acceptance.

Women's Identities and the Experience of Aging

In general, women's concerns about aging and the body are consistent with Naomi Wolf's (1991) assertion that contemporary beauty standards serve to focus much of women's attention on managing their looks and fighting aging, thereby distracting women from more meaningful endeavors. Although it has been argued that external appearances are essential for both men and women in Western societies as they are assumed to reflect people's inner characteristics (Featherstone, 1991), it is important to

understand the specific ways in which looks are connected to women's identities. While concerns about one's appearance are pervasive in the American culture, many women's deep fears about losing their youthful looks need to be examined in relation to the sources of identity that are threatened by such a loss.

Identities have been conceptualized as the various meanings attached to the self (Gecas, 1982; Vryan, Adler, & Adler, 2003). Although there is considerable overlap between the notions of self and identity, identity has generally been described as only one "component of the self" (Vryan et al., p. 368). While the distinguishing feature of the self is thought to be its agency and awareness of its own actions, identity refers more specifically to the social anchoring of the self. Thus, identities reflect individuals' locations within social structures, which can be either situational and transient (e.g., shopper, salesperson, etc), or relatively stable and characteristic of social relations over a longer period of time (e.g., identities based on gender, sexual orientation, occupation, etc).

According to both symbolic interactionists and social constructionists, identities are created through human interactions and the interpretations of those actions (Howard & Hollander, 1997; Katovich, Miller, & Stewart, 2003). However, there are notable differences among authors endorsing these paradigms in the extent to which they see identities as fluid, emergent from dynamic social interactions versus more static and constrained by individuals' positions within the social structure. The classification of identities as either "situational," "social" or "personal" (Vryan et al., 2003) is useful for distinguishing the ephemeral from the more enduring components of one's identity. Unlike the dynamic situational identity, which emerges in specific social interactions and

the rather static personal identity, which refers to aspects such as a person's name, personal history, and biographical information, social identities reflect "identifications with socially constructed groups or categories of others and [...] positions within structured social arrangements" (Vryan et al., p. 371). These groups and categories commonly represent salient socially constructed classifications of people (e.g., woman, Black person, older individual), or significant social roles that the individual plays in society (e.g., mother, employee, wife). Importantly, the concepts of role and identity are not equivalent, as identities refer to an internalized set of expectations attached to social positions, rather than to the expectations per se. Similarly, a person's position within the social structure does not automatically translate into a source of identity. Despite some general trends in what constitute salient sources of identity, there is also individual variability with regard to the categories and roles that people identify with. Thus, social identities connect the macro level of social structure with the micro level of individual meaning and action.

Identities are an important motivational force and people often strive to maintain them, particularly when the identities are threatened. For instance, certain identities such as dating partner or attractive employee may be threatened as women age, and women can be expected to either rely on alternative identities or act to restore their threatened identities. While some symbolic interactionists such as Blumer or Goffman have emphasized that identities are fluid and actively negotiated by individuals (Gecas, 1982), it is important to acknowledge that not all social actors have equal power in redefining women's social roles and structural positions and that "as women [...] attempt to negotiate their identities, they are doing so with constructions that are not reflective of

their own life experience” (Stewart, 2003, p. 767). Because understandings of women’s positions and roles largely reflect the perspectives of powerful institutions and groups (i.e., White males), women may have limited opportunities for redefining their social identities in ways that would allow them to maintain favorable identities throughout the life course.

The difficulty in subverting hegemonic understandings can be seen in feminists’ struggles to reconceptualize women’s aging and to combat the pervasive devaluation of older women. Although some feminists have argued that older women can maintain a favorable identity by assigning positive meanings to the marginalized social position to which they are confined (see Greer, 1992), other authors, beginning with Sontag, (1972/1997) have acknowledged the power of established social views in defining women’s identities. According to Sontag, it is very difficult, if not impossible, for older women to transcend the negative connotations that are socially attributed to them. Importantly, whether feminist authors call for the development of positive identities by imbuing patriarchal social constructions of aging with different meanings or, alternatively, view those social constructions as largely determining women’s identities, culturally dominant understandings of women’s aging remain a central dimension in relation to which women’s identities are constructed.

For many women in the United States as well as in other societies, heterosexual romantic relationships and marriage represent primary sources of identity. The belief that sexual orientation toward men is inevitable, labeled by Adrienne Rich (1980) “compulsory heterosexuality,” serves to confer relationships with men a privileged, if problematic, status. Because patriarchal societies largely equate women’s sexual value

with their youth and physical attractiveness, the quest for a socially desirable face and body can be understood at least in part as an attempt to achieve and maintain a positive identity by securing male validation and partnership.

The high value placed on women's relationships with male partners is compounded by the relative isolation from extended family that characterizes middle-class individuals and couples in America, which often leaves the partner as a primary source of social, emotional, and financial support. In addition, although women do form supportive friendships with other women, especially in later life (Roberto & Scott, 1984), those connections may not be able to serve as a substitute for close relationships with men (i.e., marriage) as sources of women's identity. Women's relationships with other women, regardless of how emotionally close they are, tend to be viewed as secondary to their partnerships with men (Rubin, 1985).

As evidenced by the literature on involuntary childlessness (e.g., Ireland, 1993), motherhood is an essential component of many women's identities. However, the centrality of this identity may diminish as women move beyond their reproductive and caregiving years, and their offspring are expected to become independent adults. Although womanhood is largely expressed through motherhood among women of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, children may not represent a primary source of identity for those older White, middle-class women whose children have been successfully launched into their own lives. The individualistic understandings specific to White middle-class culture may contribute to problematic aging experiences among women belonging to this social category, as they do not allow them to fully ground their identities in motherhood once children have left home and are supposedly independent.

Given these characteristics of White, middle-class women's sources of identity and considering the importance of relationships with men for many heterosexual women's identities, it is not surprising that much of the literature on women's aging has focused on perceptions of looks and physical appearance, which represent important elements for heterosexual desirability. However, the meanings associated with one's body and, even more importantly, its significance for women's identities are likely to vary based on factors such as race/ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and disability status. Studies that have examined women's experiences with aging have not typically addressed potential differences among women based on these factors.

One goal of this research is to challenge the tacit conceptualization of White, middle-class women as the taken-for-granted category, whose aging experiences are presumably reflective of women's aging experiences in general. By conveniently focusing on the study of White, middle-class women and overlooking minority women, the implicit message conveyed by much of the feminist literature on aging is that the experiences of dominant women can accurately represent the experiences of all women. Thus, my aim is to capture the aging experiences of minority women by recognizing that one's structural location may affect perceptions and evaluations of aging, as it affects other areas of life.

One danger in conducting studies about minority women's perspectives consists of positioning White, middle-class women's experiences as the standard against which minority women are evaluated and defined. As Andersen (2000) has warned, studies of racial minority women are often distorted by the fact that their experiences are perceived as peripheral to the perspectives of dominant group members. Therefore, it is important

to ground analyses of minority women's aging in aspects of their lives and identities that are likely to influence their experiences, whether or not those factors are important in the case of White, middle-class women as well. In the following, I discuss the aging experiences of minority women (i.e., racial/ethnic minorities, lower-class/working women, sexual minorities, disabled women), and outline the factors that seem most likely to influence those experiences.

Minority Status and the Experience of Aging

Although non-heterosexual and physically disabled women do not constitute the focus of the present research, previous insights regarding these women's identities, relationships with their bodies, and aging experiences can serve as a useful background to discussions about diverse women's aging experiences in the United States.

Sexual Orientation.

One source of differences between heterosexual and non-heterosexual women's aging experiences may be related to the conceptions of physical attractiveness endorsed by sexual minority women. Within lesbian communities, women have been able to subvert, at least to some degree, dominant cultural views regarding beauty standards and weight norms (Heffernan, 1999; Myers, Taub, Morris, & Rothblum, 1999). Heffernan has argued that lesbians' conceptualizations of physical attractiveness differ from those of heterosexuals, in that lesbians are more concerned with functionality than with looks *per se*. Myers *et al.* remarked that appearance norms developed within lesbian communities, which allow lesbians to identify one another and to construct a distinct group identity, are often less oppressive than mainstream expectations. For example, overweight women are more readily accepted in lesbian communities than in the

heterosexual world (Herzog, Newman, Yeh, & Warshaw, 1992), which allows women who identify as lesbians to distance themselves from dieting and other weight-loss practices that are prevalent among heterosexual women (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Of course, it would be naïve to assume that looks never limit women's opportunities for lesbian relationships (Pittman, 1999). Hefferman's study revealed that a relatively high proportion of the women in her sample reported a partner's physical attractiveness as important, even though these respondents' understandings of physical attractiveness differed from mainstream definitions of beauty. In addition, pressures to fit in the heterosexual world (e.g., in the job market or workplace) may compel lesbians to pursue the culturally valued looks, further limiting their freedom from oppressive standards (Hesse-Biber).

Studies on older lesbians have sometimes focused on their triple marginalization as women, old, and sexual minorities (Slevin, 2006). Such studies have outlined the cumulative effects of sexism, heterosexism, and ageism on older lesbians, confirming the social and economic disadvantages of distance from male power. However, Heaphy (2007) investigated the experience of aging among older lesbians and gay men and found that, contrary to popular conceptualizations that place sexual identity as the key determining factor of non-heterosexual people's experiences, there are various other aspects (e.g., social positioning) that affect their lives. In other words, "there is no unitary non-heterosexual experience" (Heaphy, p. 195) with regard to lesbians' and gay people's aging.

Nevertheless, a rather general finding has been that the aging process tends to be experienced as less painful or even less noticeable by lesbians compared to heterosexual

women. Barrett and Robbins (2008) found that lesbian and bisexual women are less likely than heterosexuals to have anxiety about declining attractiveness as they age. Interviews with lesbian women have sometimes revealed that aging is not constructed as a process that diminishes women's value, but rather as an experience that can enhance lesbians' desirability (Heaphy, 2007). This trajectory could indicate a similarity between lesbians' and men's experiences of aging, in that neither lesbians nor heterosexual men are subjected to the "male gaze" by (potential) relationship partners, and instead are valued for qualities that do not revolve around narrowly defined standards of physical attractiveness. Thus, lesbians' relative detachment from culturally mandated beauty ideals is likely to be one of the factors that enable older lesbians to experience aging more positively than their heterosexual counterparts, as revealed by the above studies.

Physical Ability.

The experiences of physically disabled women often reveal the suffering related to these minority women's distance from culturally sanctioned female bodies. Disabled women's bodies are commonly regarded as asexual, and their identities are constructed as falling outside the realm of gendered dichotomies (Ferri & Gregg, 1998). Although the sexualization of able bodied women is problematic, the perception of disabled women as completely asexual is also troublesome (Ferri & Gregg). Paradoxically, the often condemned phenomenon of objectification may be perceived as a valuable experience by disabled women who are otherwise completely invisible to male audiences (Lisi, 1999). Disabled women's experiences of invisibility are strikingly similar to those commonly reported by older women.

For many White, able-bodied women, aging involves losses in sexual attractiveness and in the extent to which they are objectified by males, which in turn are related to decreased opportunities for heterosexual relationships or for being valued socially and professionally. Because physically disabled women may experience these losses earlier in their lives as well, the process of aging is likely to carry different meanings in terms of their identities than it does for able-bodied women. Although aging entails many dimensions and may negatively impact physically disabled women in multiple ways (e.g., financially, medically), it is possible that its influence on their heterosexual-based identities is less noticeable than it is for women who once possessed a valued body and have to adjust to becoming invisible as a result of aging.

Race and Ethnicity.

The aging experiences of racial and ethnic minority women living in the United States may differ from those of Caucasian women as a result of at least two factors. First, as discussed in the case of physically disabled women, racial minorities are seldom viewed as embodying the culturally valued looks that confer women heterosexual attractiveness. Second, Black and Latina women's identities may be grounded in aspects other than those around which White, middle-class women's identities are centered, thereby making less relevant concerns about the deterioration of one's looks that permeate much of the existing literature on women's aging.

According to Patricia Hill Collins (2000), dominant standards of beauty do not simply exclude non-Whites, but they are defined and acquire meaning in opposition to characteristics of racial minorities, which are seen as the "Other." While racial minority women such as Blacks are commonly regarded as unbeautiful, they are also,

paradoxically, constructed as hypersexual: sensuous, animalistic, good in bed, and promiscuous. This legacy of the slavery era positions Black women as subhuman and beast-like, yet perpetually sexually available to (White) men (Marshall, 1996; Plous & Neptune, 1997). Depictions of racial minority women as physically unattractive and as sexualized animals limit their possibilities for self-definition as desirable and complex human beings. Therefore, racial minority women may turn to standards of beauty endorsed within their own communities, or even search for alternative sources of meaning and validation that transcend physical appearance or confer it alternative meanings.

Empirical studies have confirmed that self-evaluations of racial-minority individuals do not reflect the distance between their looks and culturally valued images, as Bordo's (1993) normalizing function would suggest. Instead, racial minorities have been repeatedly found to successfully distance themselves, at least to some extent, from the representations that exclude them. Blacks, the most extensively studied among these groups, appear to collectively redefine dominant standards regarding the body and its acceptable appearance (Hill Collins, 2000; Milkie, 1999).

In general, body image ideals endorsed within Black communities differ from those promoted within the mainstream White culture, with larger women being regarded as attractive and sexually desirable (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Moreover, in addition to the actual content of women's idealized images, the overall importance placed on looks versus other aspects of the body has also been found to be different in racial minority communities. Rubin, Fitts, and Becker (2003) examined body ideals among Black and Latina women and found that not only were these minority women's standards different

from those of the dominant culture, but their ideals also involved different elements than those typically referred to in body image discussions. Black and Latina women in this study were more concerned about health, nurturance, self-respect, and spirituality as related to the body than about *any* aesthetic ideals – whether culturally dominant or not. Consequently, it is not surprising that African-American women typically report more positive body images and higher levels of self esteem than their Caucasian counterparts (Molloy & Herzberger, 1998). A focus on aspects like spirituality and self-respect, as opposed to looks, may also enable Black and Latina women to experience aging and the physical changes of the body as less aversive, compared to White women.

Although comparative research has generally revealed that heterosexual, Caucasian women are more likely than racial minorities to be discontented with their bodies, it is important to remember that not all members of these minority groups are liberated from mainstream ideals about women's looks. In fact, such romanticized visions of minority women's relationship to oppressive beauty standards may obscure the pain experienced by some women of Color in their attempts to achieve culturally valued looks. In a study of African-American and Caucasian women aged 20 to 80 years old, Reel, SooHoo, Summerhays, and Gill (2008) found that participants of all races and ages reported self-monitoring of their bodies, as well as engagement in various activities designed to achieve culturally dominant looks. Similarly, the stories of early dieting, anorexia, and bulimia told by Rodriguez (2003) and Williams (2003) illustrate that Latina and Black women are not immune from the body image concerns of White women, as is often assumed. Hesse-Biber (2007) has suggested that these weight-control practices may be more common among the upwardly mobile Black and Hispanic women, because of

their access to traditional White, middle-class values. However, racial and ethnic minority women in general are susceptible to internalizing mainstream media ideals about what it means to be beautiful (Haboush, Warren, & Benuto, 2012).

Even those women of Color who do aspire to achieve culturally sanctioned looks are likely to realize the unlikelihood of this project earlier in their lives than White women (Hill Collins, 2000). In turn, Black women's realization and acceptance of not being able to meet culturally desired looks may prepare them for an easier transition into old age, compared to White women. The results of a nationally representative survey that assessed three sources of women's aging anxiety confirmed that African Americans are less likely than White women to express anxiety about attractiveness as they get older (Barrett & Robbins, 2008).

Although perceptions of the physical body and its distance from dominant standards of beauty may play a role in racial minority women's aging, a preoccupation with one's looks is only one of many aspects that may define the complex experience of aging. As discussed earlier, marriage and attachments to men are essential components of a desirable identity for many White women. While heterosexuality is normative for women of Color as well, their expectations regarding significant relationships do not necessarily revolve around marriage or being attached to a man, in the same way that White women's expectations do. Mothering one's biological offspring, as well as others' children appears to be a major contributor to many Black women's identities, whereas expectations of fulfillment through stable attachments to men may be reduced, at least compared to those of White women (Hill Collins, 2000).

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) has discussed some of the major stereotypes developed within the White patriarchal system to control Black women's behavior, as well as the complex relationships between those "controlling images" and the realities of Black women's lives. According to the author, although the content of stereotypes applied to Black women is different from that of stereotypes referring to White women, their dehumanizing and controlling functions are essentially similar (Hill Collins, 1986). Moreover, the pervasive stereotyping of Black women as "mammies" or "matriarchs" appears to be related to the particularities of their behavior that are deemed most threatening to White patriarchy (i.e., assertiveness and strength in socializing future generations of Black adults).

Black women are often depicted as matriarchs or strong, authoritative mothers, an image that overlooks the many difficulties encountered by Black single mothers, who often struggle with poverty when raising their children. Interestingly, despite the many limitations of viewing Black women as matriarchs, Black women as a group have been forced to integrate "economic self-reliance and mothering" (Hill-Collins, p. 184) and "are often described as strong disciplinarians and overly protective" (p. 185), raising their daughters to possess qualities such as self-reliance and assertiveness. The importance placed on motherhood and on the image of the "strong Black woman" within Black communities may be related to the relatively few opportunities for "committed love relationships with Black men" (Hill-Collins, p. 196).

The literature about Chicana/Latina women similarly reveals the centrality of mothering in the lives of these minority women (Hurtado, 2003). Moreover, many Chicana/Latina women's relationships appear to be dominated by strong emotional

connections with other women from their extended family networks. Although men occupy important authority positions as fathers or husbands in these families, they are often absent from the everyday experiences of the women and children for whom they provide material support. Thus, in contrast to White, middle-class women, Chicanas/Latinas, whether married or not, are typically part of and construct their identities in relation to close relationships with extended family members, especially with other women.

To the extent that Chicana/Latina and Black women's identities do not revolve solely or primarily around close relationships with men, the issue of preserving one's physical attractiveness may also have less importance than it has for White women. Consequently, racial minority women's experiences of aging may be defined to a lesser extent by changes in their looks, and these women may be able to more easily maintain and develop meaningful identities as they get older, compared to their White counterparts. For example, while the various dimensions of religiosity (e.g., spiritual beliefs, religious practices, or involvement in faith communities) have been found to increase physical and mental health among considerable numbers of individuals throughout the life course (Jones, 2004; Marks, 2005), religion appears to be particularly beneficial for racial and ethnic minority women as they age.

Two studies about African-American and Latino elderly living in the U.S. support the notion that the identities of aging women from these communities are grounded in their family relationships (i.e., with children, grandchildren, and extended family) as well as in their faith in God. Black's (1999) interviews with elderly (over 70 years old) African-American women living in poverty showed that their spirituality, which was

integrated with all aspects of their lives, helped the women deal with various problems such as economic hardship, loneliness, or family tragedies. Beyene, Becker and Mayen's (2002) research involving Latino immigrants of both genders aged 51 to 97 revealed that perceptions of aging were primarily determined by the support and respect the participants received from their families, especially from their children. While loneliness was the greatest fear of these respondents, strong emotional ties with family members and faith in God protected Latino/a elderly not only from feeling isolated, but also from perceiving their physical conditions as serious or debilitating.

Social Class.

Social class has been conceptualized as an individual's relative position within the social structure and is commonly measured through indicators such as income, occupation, education, or a combination of these factors. The influence of women's social class on their experiences of aging is likely to be multifaceted and, as mentioned before, cannot be entirely separated from that of race/ethnicity and sexual orientation, given the interlocking nature of these forms of oppression (Dressel, 1997). Previous studies on lower-class women's aging have commonly focused on such "objective" indicators as poor health and financial difficulties (e.g., Cruikshank, 2003; Dressel), perhaps as a result of the obvious and highly problematic nature of class-based disparities in these domains. One unintended consequence of this focus has been to overlook the subjective components of poor women's aging experiences and the diversity of layers at which aging may be experienced by women. Although the impact of increasing health problems and economic hardships on lower-class women's lives as they age constitutes a valid concern, it is important not to restrict analyses of identity and aging to middle- or

upper-class, educated women. Therefore, I will further discuss the ways in which lower-class women's identities and conceptions about the body may influence their aging experiences.

Although the literature on racial, ethnic, and sexual minority women's relationship with their bodies is well-developed and conveys several clear patterns, lower-class women's perceptions of their bodies are rarely discussed as potentially different from those of middle- and upper-class women. Several authors (Barret & Robbins, 2008; Stewart, 1998) have argued that lower-class women's looks are particularly important for success on the job and marriage market. Indeed, in many lower-status occupations such as restaurant hostess, cocktail waitress, casino dealer, or food server, women's appearance is commonly regarded as an integral component of work performance (Jones & Chandler, 2007; Lynn & Simons, 2000). Also, while women from all social classes may be economically dependent on their male partners, it has been speculated that women from poor families and with little educational background are most threatened by the dissolution of a marriage (Hurtado, 1996). However, Barrett and Robbins's prediction that lower-class women experience greater anxiety about attractiveness as they get older than middle-class women has not been supported by data from a nationally representative sample.

One possible explanation for this non-finding is that lower-class women's perceived lack of control over their own lives may contribute to their perceptions of aging as an inevitable phenomenon. One recurrent theme that transpired from Sennett and Cobb's (1972) analysis of lower-class workers was the limited power and control that these individuals have in negotiating important aspects such as work arrangements. Thus,

unlike middle-class women who are socialized to believe in their independence and ability to control their lives (even with respect to phenomena such as aging, where perceptions of control are largely illusory), lower-class women may feel that they have limited control over the evolution of their lives in general, and thus be less inclined to perceive aging as something that can be prevented through individual effort. In addition, the high cost of products and procedures aimed at rejuvenating one's looks (e.g., facial creams, gym memberships, cosmetic surgery, etc) may encourage lower-class women to adjust their expectations regarding desirable looks to meet their financial possibilities. Hence, they may not engage in extensive efforts to stop or reverse the process of aging and may more readily accept or minimize its consequences. Even so, as individuals exposed to dominant cultural discourses, lower-class women are unlikely to be completely detached from the illusion that aging can be successfully fought. As Bartky (1988) remarked, one of the fundamental characteristics of modern ways of disciplining the body through powerful social images is that preoccupation with the body has spread to women of all classes and ages, rather than being confined to a narrow range of young and aristocratic women.

Despite several authors' assumption that lower-class women tend to be highly invested in relationships with men as a source of economic advancement, empirical research has revealed that the identities of poor women are not necessarily centered around relationships with men. Edin and Kefalas's (2005) interviews with young mothers from poor neighborhoods showed that although marriage was viewed as highly desirable from multiple points of view (e.g., financial, emotional, etc), a male partner was not regarded as essential for a woman's identity. Unlike middle-class women, for whom

marriage is often a precondition for raising children, these women regarded motherhood as their main source of identity, whereas marriage was thought of as an attractive prospect if/when a proper partner becomes available. Thus, at least some lower-class women have adopted high standards regarding marriage that resemble those endorsed within middle-class circles. However, because of the scarcity of “quality” male partners in their communities due to widespread social problems such as violence, drug abuse, crime, and incarceration, these women have redefined the female identity to be expressed primarily through motherhood, rather than through relationships with men. Although marriage continues to be viewed as an attractive outcome, the reality of many poor women within certain communities not being able to secure proper male partners has resulted in a construction of identity that allows most women to feel accomplished even in the absence of the elusive up-ward marriage. This focus on motherhood among lower-class women resembles Black women’s investment in their children as a primary source of identity. Overall, these shifts in definitions of women’s identities point to the intersections of race and social class, highlighting the commonalities between lower-class women of various races, as well as the construction of identities in relation to practical conditions within one’s community.

Conceptualizing Diverse Women’s Aging Experiences.

One structural framework that can be invoked to conceptualize the differences between the aging experiences of various categories of women is Aida Hurtado’s (1996) notion of “women’s relationship to White male power,” which was developed to account for the fundamentally different ways of experiencing oppression by White, middle-class women versus minority women. According to Hurtado, White women are needed by

White men for the biological reproduction of the next generation of individuals who will occupy positions of power within the social structure. Therefore, White women's subordination is based upon their *seduction* into compliance with this reproductive role. Hurtado further remarked that White women are enticed with various material and psychological rewards to accept their motherhood functions and, moreover, have intimate ties with the White men who subordinate them. Women of Color, on the other hand, although exploited as laborers and for their sexuality, "are not needed by White men to reproduce biologically pure offspring and therefore have been subordinated through *rejection*" (Hurtado, p. vii).

One consequence of the different types of subordination experienced by women of Color versus White women is the latter group's privileged access to rewards associated with male power, which make the role of wife and mother an attractive proposition for most White women. At the same time, however, their participation in this exchange of reproductive services for male power is contingent upon White women's compliance with expectations of proper femininity, which often include women's conformity to culturally acceptable looks. In order to be chosen as wives and mothers, White women must possess desirable qualities such as beauty and youth. Women of Color, on the other hand, appear to be largely excluded from access to male power through intimate ties with White men. Paradoxically, then, White women's closer ties to White male power may not necessarily lead to more positive aging experiences. Because of White women's connections to male power through heterosexual liaisons, their stakes in maintaining those connections are very high and factors that threaten their ties to White men (e.g., aging) may be perceived as highly undesirable. On the other hand, women of Color are in

many ways reminded throughout their lives of the impossibility of achieving White women's positions within the social structure, and therefore their aging may be experienced as less disturbing.

With regard to lower-class women, Hurtado (1996) has pointed out the considerable economic advantages that marriage with higher status men can bring to women born in lower-class families. Unlike racial minority women, poor White women are commonly socialized to aspire to such marriages, although their chances of attaining this goal are lower than for middle- and upper-class women. In short, Hurtado's argument is based on the observation that lower-class White women's oppression resembles that of higher-class women (seduction into compliance with White male power, rather than rejection), suggesting that their relative lack of resources to engage in body work does not necessarily result in a decreased desire to achieve culturally valued looks and the rewards associated with those looks.

By applying the conceptual framework of distance from White male power to understanding the structural location of lesbians, Hurtado (1996) has described lesbianism as resistance to the rewards of seduction into patriarchal subordination. Thus, women who identify with other women, as opposed to men, distance themselves from the male power structure. Based on Hurtado's framework, lesbians' experiences of aging can be hypothesized to involve elements of marginalization and economic deprivation as a result of their distance from structures of power, as well as relative freedom from concerns about physical attractiveness and the seduction of males, because of the irrelevance of male attention for these women.

The relationships between women's structural distance from male power and their aging experiences that can be inferred based on Hurtado's (1996) model have generally been confirmed in studies that have looked at experiences of aging and aging anxiety among lesbians and Black women (Barrett & Robbins, 2008; Heaphy, 2007). However, as discussed previously, Hurtado's assumptions about lower-class women's oppression have been contradicted by evidence that these women's identities sometimes depend to a very small extent on the presence of a male figure (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Although structural factors such as race and class are likely to impact women's aging experiences, it is important to explore, rather than take for granted, the specific sources of identity on which women rely as they age. Thus, while Hurtado's framework is useful as a framework for understanding the multiple forms of women's oppression, it is limited in that it cannot account for potential differences among women who are similarly situated in relation White to male power.

A more nuanced analysis of diverse women's aging experiences needs to take into account race and social class not only as structural variables that determine specific outcomes, but also as groupings of women with potentially similar sources of identity. The above discussion regarding the aging experiences of minority women illustrates how perceptions of the body and sources of identity may shape experiences of aging among these women. Given that women's identities are often grounded in relationships with others (i.e., men, children, other women), it is plausible that aging experiences are also related to circumstantial factors such as the availability and quality of relationships that define one's identity. In this sense, Barrett and Robbins's (2008) nationally representative research on women aged 25 to 74 revealed that in addition to women's locations in

systems of inequality (i.e., race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and social class), connections to social institutions (i.e., marriage, family, and work) and the nature of their social ties are also related with aging anxiety, which represents one component of women's aging experiences.

Regarding connections to social institutions, the authors found that married women were less likely than separated or divorced women to have anxiety about attractiveness as they age. Further, women with more stressful and less supportive relationships were more likely to express anxiety about attractiveness, perhaps as a result of concerns about the potential dissolution of their relationships and the anticipated desire to remain marketable to future partners. The quality of family relationships other than with one's spouse or partner also impacted women's anxiety about health, underscoring the significance of help from family members in coping with declining health (Barrett & Robbins, 2008).

Employment, the second social institution examined by Barrett and Robbins (2008) did not appear to be a protective factor against women's anxiety about declining attractiveness. Although previous studies have found that full-time employment protects both White and non-White women's health (Adelmann, Antonucci, Crohan, & Coleman, 1989; Ross & Mirowsky, 1995), working women in Barrett and Robbins's study had higher levels of anxiety about attractiveness than non-working women, which is consistent with the observation that women's looks are often regarded as an important asset on the job market (Stewart, 1998). However, social support at work was not among the variables measured by Barrett and Robbins, although social support and integration appear to be the most significant contributor to health among employed women (Hibbard

& Pope, 1985). In addition, the relationship between employment and health appears to be the strongest among women who have few opportunities for social support and self-esteem outside of work, such as unmarried or uneducated women (Nathanson, 1980).

With regard to the role of women's social relationships, Barrett and Robbins (2008) revealed that women with more stressful and less supportive relationships with friends were more likely to express anxiety about both attractiveness and health, reinforcing the importance of women's friendships for various types of support as they get older. Thus, although relationships with friends are commonly thought of as less significant, deep, or enduring than kin relations (Rubin, 1985), friendships have been found to enhance older women's well-being in several different ways, including the provision of everyday companionship, support during stressful transitions, and the sustainment of women's identities (Stevens, 2001). Long-term friendships are particularly valuable in sustaining women's identities through various life changes (Stevens), and contribute uniquely to the acceptance of aging (Jerrome, 1981).

Importantly, when looking at the impact of social relationships on women's aging experiences one needs to take into account race and class differences in the types of relationships that are most significant to women. Although friendships are likely to be a valuable resource for older middle-class women, racial minorities and working class women are often immersed in extended family relationships that constitute a stable source of companionship and support (Gouldner & Symons Strong, 1987). Because female relatives of working class and minority women are often their closest friends and confidants (Gouldner & Symons Strong), family relationships, rather than outside friendships, can be expected to offer the most protection for these women as they age.

In conclusion, women's identities are likely to vary based on their racial, ethnic, and social class background, and their identities can be expected to influence women's aging experiences. At the same time, women's perceptions of their present and future identities are also likely to be related to a multitude of social and relational factors, such as current involvement in meaningful relationships or type and quality of those relationships.

Chapter 3: Current Study

The goal of the present study was to advance understandings of women's aging by examining the possible links between social location, valued identities, and aging experiences. The existing feminist literature has rarely addressed the issue of how diverse women (in terms of race, social class, etc) experience aging, and this investigation is intended to correct the classism and ethnocentrism of current conceptualizations that center on White, middle-class women. Both in this area of research and in other domains of feminist inquiry, the experiences of White, middle-class women have been often assumed to adequately reflect "women's voice" (Lugones & Spelman, 1983/2005), whereas the experiences of minority women such as Blacks or Latinas have been, at best, discussed as deviations from the norm. Moving beyond the assignment of such a peripheral role to minority women in research requires acknowledging the diversity of experiences that can be subsumed under women's voice, as well as the inclusion of minority women's experiences as an integral part of this non-unitary voice. In this sense, White, middle-class women's experiences of aging need not be viewed as the default category in relation to which all other experiences are defined and evaluated, but as one of many ways of perceiving aging in this culture.

With the exception of lesbians' relatively well-documented aging experiences, it is unclear in what ways the identities of minorities such as women of Color, lower-class/poor women, or disabled women are affected by aging. Because of practical constraints such as time limitations, in the present research I will only examine race, ethnicity, and social class as they are related to women's aging, although I acknowledge the importance of understanding disabled women's experiences as well.

The few studies that have investigated the relationship between variables such as race, class, or sexual orientation and the subjective experience of aging (e.g., Abramson & Silverstein, 2006; Barrett & Robbins, 2008) have typically focused on narrow outcomes such as aging anxiety. Although this construct is useful for establishing patterns regarding the categories of women most affected by or anxious about specific age-related changes (e.g., physical appearance, health, ability to bear children), it is insufficient for understanding complex experiences such as the possible tensions between women's awareness of societal prejudices and their own struggles to maintain or achieve a positive identity. The main premise of this study is that women's aging experiences are closely related with the identities that are of greatest importance to them and the ways in which those identities are influenced by aging.

As discussed earlier, women's aging experiences have been found to vary based on their age. For example, younger women tend to have higher levels of anxiety about age-related changes in physical attractiveness and health than older women (Barret & Robbins, 2008). Not surprisingly, some authors have warned that talking about women without referencing their age is just as misleading as overlooking other factors such as race or social class (Calasanti & Slevin, 2006). Thus, in examining the relationship between women's identities and their aging experiences, it is important to focus on an age group that is not so diverse as to preclude meaningful comparisons among those experiences.

According to many authors (e.g., Calasanti & Slevin, 2006; Ray, 2006), middle-age is associated with a variety of potentially significant transformations in women's lives. Physically, women go through menopause and experience changes in appearance

that may decrease their sexual attractiveness. Important transitions such as moving from a caregiver role to one's children to an empty nest, or starting caring for one's parents also have the potential to produce identity changes during this time. Consistent with the view of middle-age as marked by major changes, women's life course has sometimes been divided into two halves – see Ray's (2006) account of age and identity in Betty Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique." Whereas the first half has been assumed to be dominated by romance and motherhood, the second part, beginning at age forty, has been viewed as a time when women are compelled to ask themselves who they are, beyond those prescribed roles (Ray, 2006). Whether or not women go through an identity crisis, as suggested by Friedan, the middle years appear to be a particularly interesting time for exploring the evolution of women's identities and how they shape aging experiences. For this reason, middle-aged women have been chosen for inclusion in the present study.

Although delineating a specific age range to achieve such a recruitment goal can be viewed as somewhat arbitrary, it is a necessary step in describing the study sample. Thus, the age of forty, which is commonly associated with the onset of women's middle-age (e.g., Ray, 2006), was selected as the lower limit of the inclusion interval. On the other hand, sixty-five, which approximately corresponds to the age of full retirement in this country, has been chosen as the upper limit. Because retirement can be expected to bring about a new set of transitions, challenges, and opportunities, the maximum age limit in the sample was meant to demarcate the upper boundary of middle-age. Thus, the 40 to 65 age interval has been used to focus this research on those identity changes and aging experiences that are most typical of women's middle years.

Based on the existing literature regarding women's aging and taking into account the gaps in understanding highlighted above, the following research questions and expectations have been formulated for the current study. The general research questions and expectations are followed by a series of specific questions and expectations, meant to provide a more detailed account of the possible relationships between women's social location, valued identities, and aging experiences.

General Research Questions

What is the relationship between middle-aged women's valued identities and their experiences with aging? More specifically, do middle-aged women in different race and class categories experience aging differently and if so, to what extent is this related to the identities they value and their impact on the aging experience?

General Expectations

Valued identities refer to any aspects of a woman's life that are important and meaningful to her. Valued identities can be derived from relationships that a woman has or aspires to have (e.g., wife, mother), from beliefs that are essential to how she views herself and the world (e.g., believer in God, feminist), or from activities that she finds meaningful (e.g., business person, agent of social change). In general, I expect that if women have opportunities to maintain or achieve identities that they value as they age, they will have more positive aging experiences than if they do not have such opportunities.

Previous studies suggest that although women of different races and social classes share valued identities such as mother, wife, or employee, the relative importance of their identities may vary based on women's backgrounds. Minority women such as Blacks,

Latinas, and lower-class/poor women have been found to value motherhood, family ties, or connection with God (Beyene, Becker, & Mayen, 2002; Black, 1999; Gouldner & Strong, 1987; Hill Collins, 2000) to an extent that may be higher than among White, middle-class women. Because of these potential differences in women's valued identities based on their social location and considering the hypothesized relationship between valued identities and aging experiences, I expect that there are also race and class differences in the ways in which women experience aging.

Specific Research Questions and Expectations

a. How do women feel about aging and what factors influence those feelings?

The existing literature suggests that despite the negative connotations of women's aging in this culture, women's actual experiences with aging may be quite diverse. For some women aging may be primarily associated with various losses and with a threat to their identities, whereas other women may successfully distance themselves from those connotations and assign positive meanings to aging. Still others may remain relatively untouched by societal prejudices and experience aging positively or neutrally.

I expect that the meanings each woman assigns to aging will be largely determined by the extent to which the identities that she values can be achieved or maintained as she ages. In particular, I expect that identities grounded in heterosexual relationships have more potential to result in difficult aging experiences for women, compared to other identities such as mother or religious person. Because women's perceived value as heterosexual partners is often contingent upon their physical appearance, I expect that some of the women for whom such relationships are very important may be particularly threatened by aging. More specifically, women who desire

a relationship with a man and do not currently have one, or those who feel insecure in their current relationship may experience aging more negatively than women who are firmly grounded in heterosexual relationships such as long-term marriages, or women for whom heterosexual partnerships are not a crucial aspect of identity. In addition, I expect that identities derived from work careers or other activities in which youth or physical attractiveness are important will be more negatively impacted by aging than identities derived from activities that do not require women to be or to look young. Examples of professions in which youthful looks are particularly important include restaurant hostess and cocktail waitress (Jones & Chandler, 2007), food server (Lynn & Simons, 2000), and flight attendant (Hochschild, 1983). Other activities in which women's physical attractiveness may be essential are social dancing and networking.

I also expect that women's connections to social institutions (e.g., marriage, family, work, church, etc) and social roles influence the meanings they attach to aging. According to symbolic interactionist accounts of identity (particularly the more structural ones like those presented by Kuhn and Stryker), people's identities are largely determined by their locations and roles within the social structure (Weigert & Gecas, 2003). Thus, women's connections to social institutions are likely to constitute bases for identity because of the socially meaningful positions and roles that they confer to women. Therefore, I expect that connections to social institutions and social roles influence women's aging experiences by shaping the identities that are important to them.

At the same time, there may not be a perfect correspondence between women's connections to social institutions and the identities that they value most. Some women may be connected to social institutions and not regard their respective roles as important

sources of identity (for instance, a woman may have a stellar career yet not regard it as a central element of her identity), whereas others may have valued identities that are not materialized through actual social roles (for example, a woman who places a high value on motherhood or marriage may nevertheless be childless or divorced). I expect that women's aging experiences are influenced by the degree to which women's valued identities are or have the potential to be fulfilled through their connections to social institutions and social roles as they age.

b. How (if at all) do women's identities change as a result of getting older and to what do women attribute their identity changes?

Previous studies (e.g., Wilcox, 1997) have found that women progressively detach themselves from the pressures of youth as they age. For example, having a body that resembles the culturally sanctioned ideal becomes less important for women as they get older, perhaps as a result of their realization that attaining that standard is increasingly difficult. At the same time, various indicators of psychological well-being reveal that women may have better outcomes in several areas such as identity certainty (understood as "an affirmed sense of self and of one's place in the social world") or confident power (conceptualized as "feelings of mastery and competence") as they age (Miner-Rubino, Winter, & Stewart, 2004, p. 1599). These findings suggest that a change of focus from the body to other endeavors may be at least partly responsible for women's increasing psychological well-being as they get older, despite their bodies' distance from cultural beauty standards.

Consistent with this observation and with symbolic interactionist accounts of social identity as dynamic and responsive to life circumstances, I expect that women's

sources of identity evolve as they age in order to allow for the creation and maintenance of a positive identity. In some cases, this evolution may be the result of failed attempts to preserve a previous identity – for example, an older woman may eventually abandon her identity as an attractive sex object after all efforts to preserve her youthful looks have failed, and instead turn to her creative personality as a source of identity and fulfillment. In other cases, the transcendence of old identities may emerge as women take on different roles or assign new meanings to their connections to social institutions and social roles. For instance, motherhood, friendships, or volunteering may gain new meanings as women age.

c. How (if at all) do women expect their identities to change as they age?

Understanding women's expectations regarding their future identities is important because projected identities (a concept similar to Markus and Nurius's (1986) "possible selves") are likely to influence the ways in which women currently experience aging. For example, if a woman expects to rely heavily on her relationship with God as she gets older and to draw on this as a primary source of identity, she may be less preoccupied with age-related changes in her physical appearance than a woman for whom finding a husband in the future is a priority. In general, I expect that women's projections about future identities will be determined by their contextualized perceptions of what aspects could allow them to maintain or achieve a positive identity as they age.

d. What strategies do women employ to maintain or achieve valued identities as they age and what factors influence which strategies are used?

The strategies employed by women to maintain or achieve valued identities are likely to depend, to a large extent, on the nature of the desired identities. For example, a

middle-aged woman who desires motherhood may decide to adopt a child, whereas another woman may enroll in graduate school to pursue the career she envisages. Although there may be great variability in women's sources of identity and ways to achieve them, I expect that one critical element for differentiating between valued identities is the extent to which they are contingent upon women's youth or youthful looks. Thus, I expect that for women whose valued identities depend on their physical attractiveness (e.g., securing a male partner, keeping a specific job), maintaining or achieving those identities is likely to involve activities meant to preserve or enhance physical appearance. On the other hand, I expect that women whose valued identities do not depend upon their looks (e.g., motherhood) are less likely to engage in such behaviors.

e. How do women feel about age-related changes in physical appearance and what factors influence those feelings?

Because of Western cultural values that emphasize women's youth and beauty, I expect that many women – regardless of background or valued identities – will be affected to some extent by the physical changes that accompany aging. More specifically, I expect that women's changing looks will be perceived as somewhat undesirable by most women as a result of the cultural associations between women's aging and various negative attributes.

However, I expect that the degree to which women are affected by age-related changes in physical appearance will be determined by the identities that women value and the extent to which the maintenance or attainment of those identities relies upon culturally sanctioned looks. As discussed earlier, I expect that for certain categories of

women who are highly invested in heterosexual relationships, as well as for women who aspire to careers in which physical attractiveness is deemed essential are likely to be more profoundly affected by changes in appearance than other women for whom physical attractiveness is not so closely tied to valued identities.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The present study investigated aging experiences and factors that shape those experiences in a sample of middle-aged women. Because the purpose of this research was in-depth understanding of meanings and interpretations associated with women's aging in a particular social and historical context, a qualitative research design was used. More specifically, the study was guided by a phenomenological conceptual framework, as it sought to understand middle-aged women's aging from the perspectives of those who have experienced it (Merriam *et al.*, 2002). Such an approach enables the researcher to arrive at a deep understanding of how participants experience the phenomenon of interest, as well as to identify and synthesize any commonalities in their experiences (Saldana, 2011).

As is common in phenomenological studies, the primary means of data collection for this project involved in-depth interviewing of a relatively small, non-probabilistic sample of participants. In the following, I describe the methodological steps involved in gathering the data, by detailing the characteristics of the participants, the recruitment methods, and the study procedures. Finally, I discuss the strategies employed in analyzing the rich interview data, both at an individual and at a group level.

Participants

The participants were twenty-one middle-aged women (between 40 and 65) with diverse ethnic and social class backgrounds residing in or near Reno, Nevada. Two thirds of the participants (fourteen women) identified as Caucasian or White, and one third (seven women) as Latina or Hispanic. Participants' ages were approximately evenly distributed within the selected interval, with six women in their forties, nine in their

fifties, and six in their sixties. A summary of participants' demographic background is presented in Appendix 1, followed by an outline of their relationship and family situation (Appendix 2), as well as a schematic overview of their religiosity, community engagement, and political participation (Appendix 3). All interviewees were fluent in English, although most of the Latina women were non-native English speakers.

This research focused on middle-aged women's aging experiences because of the various transitions and identity changes that can be expected to happen during those years. Moreover, having a racially/ethnically and socioeconomically diverse sample was deemed important because the previous literature suggested that women's identities are likely to vary according to those dimensions, and my expectation was that aging experiences may also vary based on race and social class. While there are other markers of diversity among women (e.g., sexual orientation, disability status) that I acknowledge in the literature review as potentially impacting women's identities and aging experiences, they do not constitute the focus of the present study. Unlike sexual orientation, which has been relatively well-researched in the context of women's aging (e.g., Heaphy, 2007), race/ethnicity and class have often been overlooked in examinations of subjective aging experiences.

Nearly all of the Latina participants indicated that they came from a working-class background, with only one identifying her family of origin as middle-class. Among the Caucasian participants, seven described their family background as working-class, four as middle-class, and three as upper middle-class. However, family of origin social class often did not correspond with participants' current social class standing as suggested by their level of education, occupation, and annual household income category. For

example, three of the Latina participants and five of the Caucasian participants with working-class backgrounds had at least a four-year college degree, with many of these highly-educated women reporting annual household incomes above 50,000 dollars. On the other hand, a considerable number of participants who reported coming from middle-class or upper middle-class families had not earned a college degree and had incomes in the lower ranges. These inconsistencies precluded the classification of the women as belonging to discreet social class categories. Instead, the different indicators used to measure this construct were looked at separately as part of the data analysis.

Recruitment Methods

The recruitment goal of this study was to find thirty volunteers uniformly distributed across the different racial categories (i.e., ten women from each racial group). Further, within each racial category, the aim was to recruit equal proportions of lower-class and middle-class women. Although the final sample of participants was fairly diverse, recruitment of racial minority women proved to be challenging and resulted in some limitations in the composition of the sample, the most important of which is the lack of African American participants.

Recruitment was initiated in July 2011 and entailed a variety of methods, including flyers posted on University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) bulletin boards, announcements on the local Craigslist website, an email to the UNR Center for Student Cultural Diversity listserv sent out by the director of that center, classroom presentations in which UNR students were asked to pass on the study information to any eligible women they may know (e.g., mothers, aunts, etc), and networking with friends and acquaintances. The recruitment flyers and announcements described the research as a

“study about women’s experiences with aging,” and listed the inclusion criteria below the title of the flyer or announcement (i.e., women between the ages of 40 and 65 that are Black/African American, Hispanic/Latina, or White/Caucasian, with diverse educational levels and occupations). The recruitment materials also contained a brief description of the procedures, namely filling out a brief questionnaire and participating in an interview about experiences with aging, as well as the expected time commitment of participation (approximately one and a half hours). It was also made clear that all interviews were going to be conducted in English and audio taped, and that participants would receive a five dollar gift card. Finally, readers were instructed to call or email the researcher if interested in participating or in finding out more about the study.

When prospective participants contacted the researcher, they were asked a series of questions to ensure their eligibility and to avoid over-representing certain categories of women in the sample. More specifically, the screening script (Appendix 4) contained questions about women’s age, race, education, and occupation, with the latter two indicators being used to get a sense of women’s social class standing.

Shortly after recruitment began, a considerable number of White women (and only one Hispanic woman) volunteered to take part in the study. Some of the early participants also offered to advertise the study to other women they knew, which resulted in additional volunteers recruited via snowball sampling. Thus, the majority of interviews with White women were conducted within the next few weeks, and included participants recruited via campus flyers, media outlets (i.e., Craigslist), social networking, and snowball sampling. Unexpectedly, one person who found out about this research took the initiative to publish the study information in the Reno Gazette Journal, which led even

more White women to contact the researcher. Because the number of White participants planned for inclusion in this study was exceeded in a very short time, many volunteers from this racial group had to be turned down at various points of the recruitment process. Those volunteers were thanked for their interest and told that the interviewer had already enrolled in the study sufficient participants with their demographic characteristics.

Given that the above strategies resulted in virtually no racial minority participants, subsequent recruitment efforts during the next five months were designed to specifically recruit Latina and African American women. The researcher engaged in networking with colleagues, friends, and acquaintances who belonged to or were connected to Hispanic or African American communities, and asked them to let eligible women know about the study. After having relied on a wide range of connections and waited for long periods of time between interviews, by the end of November seven Latina women had been interviewed for this research. However, all attempts to recruit African American women had proven unsuccessful. Although the researcher's acquaintances managed to spread the word about the study to several Black women that turned out not to be interested in participating, it was particularly disappointing to have no volunteers after engaging members of the African American community in the recruitment campaign. More specifically, the researcher asked two well-connected African American women belonging to distinct churches to advertise the study within their religious communities. Based on established recommendations regarding the recruitment of racial minorities in social and clinical research (Cannon *et al.*, 1988; Smith *et al.*, 2007), this method had been deemed the most likely to generate volunteers. Another recruitment method that

surprisingly failed involved two Black colleagues of the researcher posting flyers at different hair salons frequented by African American women.

While the very small percentage of African Americans in this geographical area (less than three percent) might explain the non-response to mass media advertisements, the failure of recruitment attempts within the African American community could potentially be related to other factors, such as lack of trust in academic institutions. Perhaps as a result of the well-established historical exploitation of this racial group in medical research, authors in the medical field have consistently documented the difficulties of recruiting African Americans, as well as the perceptions and attitudes (primarily mistrust in the way in which members of their racial group are positioned in research and concerns about the ethical behavior of investigators) underlying their low levels of participation in clinical studies (Corbie-Smith *et al.*, 1999; Crawley, 2001; Freimuth *et al.*, 2001; Mouton *et al.*, 1997; Shavers, Lynch, & Burmeister, 2002; Smith *et al.*, 2007). Similarly, social science research, including Western feminist research and theory, has often omitted or misrepresented the concerns of the African American community and, in particular, of Black women (Hill Collins, 2000). Not surprisingly, qualitative researchers studying women's lives have also found that it is more difficult and labor-intensive to recruit Black women than White women (Cannon, Higginbotham, & Leung, 1988).

The strategies proposed for enhancing African American women's participation in clinical and social research include the presence of minority women as members of the research team; verbal, face-to-face contact with African-American researchers or other African American women working with the research team during recruitment; offering

compensation to participants; and conducting research that is directly relevant to the minority women or their communities (Cannon *et al.*, 1988; Smith *et al.*, 2007). As Cannon *et al.* (p. 450) phrased it, “[w]hen Black women felt assured that the research was worthwhile, they were eager to participate.” Although one limitation of the present study is that the researcher, as well as her dissertation advisor and committee members, are highly-educated White women, efforts were made to rely on African American women for helping with recruitment. Therefore, African American women’s non-participation in this study cannot simply be dismissed as the outcome of this racial minority’s lack of trust in social research. Instead, it constitutes a reason to reflect upon the possible meanings this study may have for different categories of women, and the way they perceive its costs and benefits.

Whereas most White participants and some of the Latina women (with diverse social class backgrounds) clearly welcomed the opportunity to talk about their experiences, sharing their feelings with a non-Black researcher was likely not seen as intrinsically rewarding by African American women who found out about the study. One Black professional woman who helped with recruitment pointed out how busy the lives of many African American women are as they juggle paid work and family responsibilities. In light of this remark and considering that compensation for participation in the present study was merely symbolic, it is possible that the study failed to generate sufficient interest to overcome other barriers that might have interfered with the time commitment of participation.

Procedures

The data for this study were collected via semi-structured, in-depth interviews and through a brief demographic questionnaire administered prior to the interviews. Semi-structured interviews entail preparing a set of questions in advance, as well as asking follow-up questions during the interview to encourage participants to elaborate upon or clarify their responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Because the research questions addressed the relationship between important identities and aging experiences, the interview questions were designed to specifically gather data about those dimensions. However, although the general areas to be touched upon during each interview were pre-established, the goal of the study was to collect rich and detailed information about how women define themselves and how they feel about aging. In-depth interviews allow the researcher to obtain such data, by leaving questions open-ended, maintaining a level of flexibility in the wording of questions and in the order in which they are asked, and encouraging participants to share experiences, examples, and personal stories (Rubin & Rubin). Thus, the in-depth qualitative interviewing format enabled the participants to elaborate on the complexities of their experiences and sometimes even to grapple with seemingly contradictory feelings or thoughts.

Given that the aim of this study was in-depth understanding of aging experiences and how they are related to important identities rather than generalizing the findings to certain populations (e.g., White middle-class women or working class Latina women from the Reno area), a purposeful, non-probability sample (Marshall, 1996) was appropriate in this case. The sample of twenty-one women allowed the interviewer to focus on the details of each participant's experience, while also examining a range of

experiences and looking for patterns based on race and social class. Importantly, because this qualitative investigation was meant to illuminate complex issues using a non-random sample, the present data do not necessarily reflect the experiences of women beyond this sample.

All interviews were audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of the data and to allow the researcher to focus on participants' responses without also having to manage note taking. The majority of the interviews (fifteen) were conducted in private rooms at the UNR Knowledge Center, with the rest taking place at participants' work offices (four), one at a public library, and one at the home of the participant. Given the potential dangers associated with publicizing the researcher's name and contact information via outlets such as Craigslist and the fact that the researcher did not know any of the participants prior to meeting them for this study, going to their homes was generally not deemed safe (an exception was made with one woman who was recruited through a friend).

In general, when prospective participants did not have a clear preference for a meeting location, the Knowledge Center was suggested to them as a safe and quiet place where the researcher could reserve a private room whenever needed. Participants interviewed at the Knowledge Center were also offered day parking permits, to avoid the high cost of parking on the UNR campus. Despite initial concerns that such an environment could be intimidating to women with little education that may be unfamiliar with a university campus, participants with all types of backgrounds appeared very comfortable in that setting. Several women made laudatory remarks about the building, and one participant with no college degree and little previous presence of the campus

expressed gratitude for having gotten to see that place, which she contrasted with other areas of the city.

Upon meeting with the potential participant, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and the procedures to be followed, as well as encouraged her to carefully read the information sheet. The interviewer also made sure that the potential participant was aware of her right to refuse participation at any time. To protect the confidentiality of the participants and of others whom they might decide to talk about, the women were asked not to mention any real names during the interview. Instead, the participants were instructed to refer to others by naming their relationship with those people (e.g., my ex-husband, my daughter, etc). Contrary to the interviewer's suggestion, some participants did use real names during the interview. To keep those names confidential, they were replaced with fictitious names in all direct quotations included to illustrate the main findings of this research.

Once women verbally consented to participate in the research, they were asked to fill out the demographic questionnaire (Appendix 5). The questionnaire was designed to elicit basic information about the participants in a quick, straightforward manner. Items on the questionnaire asked about aspects related to participants' social class (e.g., education, occupation, annual household income category, parents' occupation, etc), family characteristics (e.g., number of siblings, number of children, etc), relationship status, religious views, community and political activities, and feminist identification.

After the participants finished filling out the questionnaire, the researcher took a few minutes to review that information and take notes, to have a better grasp of participants' backgrounds during the interview. Subsequently, when both the participant

and the researcher were ready to begin the interview, the voice recorder was turned on. The interviews (Appendix 6) entailed asking a set of predetermined questions, as well as probing beyond the established questions or slightly modifying them, depending on participants' responses. The interview guide contained questions regarding important identities, previous and anticipated changes in identities, and participants' feelings about aging and age-related changes in their body and physical appearance. The length of the interviews ranged from approximately thirty minutes to two and a half hours, with the majority lasting around one hour.

The interview questions were generated based on this study's research questions, by translating them into conversation-style language. After developing an initial version of the interview guide, the researcher pre-tested it with two middle-aged female colleagues in the presence of her advisor. Although the original plan had been to ask the demographic questions during the interview rather than via a questionnaire, the excessive length of the pretest interviews highlighted the need to better focus on important identities and aging experiences during the conversation with the participant. Therefore, all of the demographic questions were removed from the interview guide and rewritten in a paper-and-pencil questionnaire format, and the remaining portion of the interview guide was slightly modified to reflect that change. The new interview guide and the questionnaire were again pre-tested with a middle-aged female relative of the advisor and deemed acceptable. Subsequently, the interview guide and the questionnaire were shared with the researcher's dissertation committee members and, after implementing their suggested changes, the final versions of these documents were obtained.

The interviews typically began with the researcher going over the participant's family relationships (as they appeared on the questionnaire), and asking her whether any of those relationships or the roles corresponding to them (e.g., mother, wife, etc) are important to the participant and define who she is. This introduction was meant to serve as a conversation starter, by making the transition from the questionnaire to the interview and providing examples of what the concept of identity may refer to. An unintended effect of this opening strategy was that some participants felt compelled to talk about the family relationships referenced in the questionnaire, even when those were not particularly important to them. After the researcher noticed this tendency and gained more experience with the interviewing process, she became better skilled at encouraging the participants to focus on those identities that were most important, regardless of what their family situation might have been.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, and the data were then analyzed using a framework analysis approach. This qualitative method designed to identify a thematic framework is well suited for research that has specific, a priori questions, as well as a limited time-frame and a pre-designed sample (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). In the case of the present study, the research questions (which focused on various aspects concerning the relationship between valued identities and aging experiences) had been formulated prior to the collection of the data. Similarly, the time-frame for the data collection (i.e., until the completion of a certain number of interviews) and the characteristics of the sample (i.e., middle-aged women with diverse backgrounds) had been established prior to the interviewing phase, rather than being dependent upon

the outcomes of previous interviews. Thus, despite its similarity with grounded theory in that both procedures involve the identification of emergent themes, framework analysis is more adequate for describing and interpreting particular, relatively well-defined experiences such as the ones examined here.

Ritchie and Spencer (1994) have described framework analysis as a five step process, which includes familiarization; identifying a thematic framework; indexing, charting; and mapping and interpretation. In the context of this project, the researcher's familiarization with the data was achieved during the transcription and initial organization of the interview material. More specifically, the information contained within each transcript was organized in sections by grouping the data according to the research questions (e.g., important identities, past identities, feelings about changes in the body and physical appearance, etc). Besides the direct quotations from the interview corresponding to each section, a bulleted summary of the main issues addressed within that section was also added to facilitate further analyses of the data at the individual level and across participants.

After having achieved familiarity with the content of the interviews, the researcher proceeded to search for common themes expressed by the participants. In accordance with the research questions, women's responses to particular topics (e.g., past identities, feelings about aging, etc) were examined to identify experiences or feelings that appear in multiple interviews and therefore constitute common themes. This step resulted in the identification of recurrent themes pertaining to the two broad areas investigated, namely valued identities and aging experiences. Also following the original research questions, ethnicity and social class were examined as potentially related to

women's valued identities and aging experiences, and the few instances in which such differences were found are highlighted in the data analysis chapters. Importantly however, given that the diverse measures used to gauge participants' social class standing (i.e., education, occupation, income, family of origin social class) were often inconsistent, the identified patterns are reported in relation to the specific measure in which they were detected, rather than to a social class category. Further, in addition to this group-level analysis of common trends, women's individual aging experiences have been situated in the context of their particular identities to better understand the role played by different types of identities in shaping feelings about aging.

While many of the emergent themes were closely related to the issues addressed within the research questions, as can be expected during a framework analysis, an effort was made to "allow the data to dictate the themes and issues" (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009, p. 76). In other words, although the original questions guided the thematic analysis, the data have not been forced to fit those pre-established categories. Consistent with a phenomenological approach, the primary task in capturing the essence of participants' experiences and detecting common themes during this stage was researcher reflection on the study data (Saldana, 2011).

In addition to identifying recurrent themes, the researcher also delineated portions of the interview transcripts relating to each theme and pasted them in separate documents adjacent to the theme they exemplified. These procedures correspond to the indexing and charting steps invoked by Ritchie and Spencer (1994). Importantly, although parts of the data were removed from their original textual context, they continued to be identified in terms of which participant they belonged to.

Finally, the mapping and interpretation stage consists of using the previously identified themes to better understand the phenomenon of interest as a whole by summarizing the findings in a schematic fashion (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). In this case, the two data analysis chapters (related to valued identities and feelings about aging), along with their respective sections and subsections, provide a schematic view of the key themes related to each of the main topics investigated. Whereas the major themes are discussed in detail throughout these chapters to highlight the range of identities and aging experiences recounted by the participants, the concluding analysis involved moving beyond a simple aggregation of the themes to discovering the overall picture that emerges from the data. Thus, during this more general analytical process, the researcher weighed the importance of the different themes and considered the thematic framework in relation to the objectives of the study.

Chapter 5: Identities in Flux

Before being asked to share their aging experiences, the women in this study were encouraged to talk fairly extensively about the identities they valued, as well as to recount 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 fluctuations over time was meant to provide a better understanding of the factors that influence aging experiences, as the research questions and associated expectations revolved around valued identities as a key element in understanding women's subjective experiences with aging.

As the reader will remember from a previous chapter, this study's research questions and expectations were highly defined and enabled the collection of open-ended interview data in a purposeful manner. While the study data are adequate to answer those questions, presenting the results in a way that rigidly adheres to those initial formulations appeared to artificially and unnecessarily restrict the richness of the responses. Thus, after making a variety of efforts to organize the results, it seemed that the presentation format that best reveals the complexity of the data and does it justice involves structuring the results around common themes related to valued identities and aging experiences. After presenting in detail women's present, past, and future identities in this first chapter, the following chapter, which is devoted to aging experiences and similarly clustered around major themes, will contain references to these identities and their impact on the aging experience.

Currently Valued Identities

The first portion of the interviews involved asking the participants about those identities that they valued most or defined how they saw themselves. As expected, family-oriented identities such as mother or wife and, to a lesser extent, daughter, sister, or grandmother were commonly mentioned by White and Latina women alike as very important. Friendships also played a substantial role in many women's lives, and were sometimes considered even more significant than blood connections. Other aspects that women invoked as central to their identities included religion or spirituality, volunteering, career, and education.

With a few exceptions that will be pointed out throughout this section, there were no obvious patterns in participants' valued identities that could be related to their ethnicity, educational level, occupation, or income category. Thus, contrary to the formulated expectations, important identities did not appear to vary considerably based on these structural variables, which the previous literature has sometimes linked to the preferential endorsement of specific types of identities. Women's valued identities are presented below, grouped according to the major themes that emerged from the data.

Mother

All of the participants, with the exception of three Caucasian women, had children or stepchildren. Thus, it is not surprising that being a mother (or, in a few instances, a single mother or a stepmother) was frequently mentioned among women's central identities. For these participants, motherhood had overwhelmingly positive connotations and was sometimes regarded as their most significant role or identity. Perhaps the most striking example of devotion to motherhood was Sandra, who had been "defined since a

very young age by two things,” namely motherhood and being a professional worker. A highly educated immigrant from Mexico, Sandra started seeing herself as a mother at the age of three, and at 54 had a great relationship with her two grown-up children.

Kerry and Susan, whose children and stepchildren were also adults aged 18 or older, felt that motherhood enabled them to forge deep bonds within their families. Much like Sandra, they viewed being a mother as the most important role in their lives.

I think... my role still as mother is I identify most, because I still have them all at home, for the most part [...] because they are all college students. And we... we're very good friends for the most part, they are very much a part of my... my social life, as well as my... as a family structure. You know, we do a lot of things together, we're very close to one another, so that's very important role still to me. (Kerry, Caucasian, 49 years old)

The most important role in my life is... umm... that of mother in my family. Mother to my children and my stepchildren, umm... the... the heart, I like to think of myself as the heart of my family. (Susan, Caucasian, 56 years old)

Linda and Jennifer, both in their mid-forties, similarly talked about the centrality of motherhood and feeling fulfilled and successful in that role. Although Linda had an estranged son that she did not see or talk to, the relationship with her younger daughter allowed her to truly dedicate herself to raising a child as a single mother.

The first one would be mother, I feel very strongly about that, because I have a child at home – an eleven year old. My daughter is just like me, so it makes things very difficult at times, and... we have, I would call it a good relationship – you know, it has its flaws, it has its faults, but she's eleven and a half, and my role right now is to guide her into adulthood and to create a happy successful, positive adult, and I take that role very seriously, probably too seriously sometimes, but I also give her opportunities in life. [...] I feel successful. (Linda, Caucasian, 44 years old)

Like Linda's daughter, Jennifer's two teenage sons were still living at home, and supporting them was a major source of satisfaction for her.

I: How does being a mom and a step-mom make you feel about yourself?

P: Hmm... fulfilled, I think. [...] I think it's important that we give to other people, and being a mom and a wife allows me to do that. (Jennifer, Caucasian, 43 years old)

Debbie, who was also raising a teenager, explained that the relationship with her son was the most important at the moment because of his vulnerability and dependence on her.

I have one child. So, he's my only child. And, I just think that that's the most important now, because... umm... I think he, of all the people that I have close relationships with, he's the most vulnerable. (Debbie, Caucasian, 46 years old)

Olivia and Kimberly mentioned the pride they felt raising their children and witnessing their development. Olivia, herself a member of a large Mexican family with ten siblings, had four children and had felt for a long time that raising them was her most significant life project.

I: How does being a mother make you feel about yourself?

P: Very good. I'm proud of that. Because, some people they know what they want maybe later in life, but when I have my kids I know what I want. So I know I want to stay with them, and raise them myself and not other people. So for me what's important to raise them by myself and be the persons they are right now I'm proud of that. (Olivia, Latina, 48 years old)

For Kimberly, the unexpected progress of her disabled son was particularly remarkable. She talked touchingly about the great deal of satisfaction that the motherhood journey had brought her, despite the additional effort demanded by her son's condition.

We have a son who is 39, and... umm... we always wanted more children, but he was born with a really serious birth defect. [...] So, we're so proud of him and he is just... he's just a gift. [...] VERY proud, very proud of him – although, to be honest, I think sometimes when you have a disabled child it makes you [...] I

think you sometimes fill in for those abnormalities that your children have by trying to make things a little bit better for them. [...] But yeah, we're just real proud of him and amazed, and he's so happy and so well-adjusted, I just get emotional talking, but seriously, he's just... umm... just a happy, happy, well-adjusted man. (Kimberly, Caucasian, 63 years old)

Other participants emphasized the importance of maintaining good communication with the younger generations. Lynette, for instance, proudly mentioned her use of technology and computer programs (including texting and facebook) to stay connected with her busy children, while Emily talked about being "very close" to her sons and calling them every day, even as they were over the age of 30.

As illustrated in the above examples, a high investment in motherhood was common among the women in this sample. Although there was a small number of participants (both White and Latina) who were mothers but did not think of that identity as particularly important at this time in their lives, women with different ethnic and social class backgrounds appeared similarly inclined to embrace motherhood as a central identity.

Wife or Partner

According to the questionnaire data, approximately half of the Latina participants and one third of the Caucasians were in their first marriage, whereas the other women fell into one or several of the following categories: divorced, single and not seeing anyone, in a relationship but not living together, living with a partner, or remarried. Many, although not all women involved in the various relationship types enumerated above indicated that those were important in terms of how they saw themselves, although the meanings associated with their relationships varied. In general, participants who brought up

intimate relationships as a central identity valued qualities such as friendship, support, mutual respect, or communication within the couple.

A few wives described their husbands as the love of their life or as someone who represents everything for them. One of those wives was Susan, who felt very lucky and had nothing but appreciative words to say about the man that she was married to.

I'm married to a wonderful, wonderful man, he is just... umm... he is the love of my life. He is smart, he is... he is talented, he is charming, he is as supportive as... to me as I hope I am to him, as I try to be to him. And I'm very fortunate in having a very good relationship with him. He is both my... my husband, my lover, and my best friend. (Susan, Caucasian, 56 years old)

Such strong feeling of closeness and intimacy were also invoked by Anne, who saw her partner of thirty-four years as her soul mate and family.

Well, of course, my... my partner of 34 years, that's OUR family... [...] one of the very few people who accepts me for who I am, regardless. (Anne, Caucasian, 65 years old)

In addition to talking about a range of social, family of origin, and circumstantial influences that had an impact on their relationship over the years (some of which, especially homophobia, helped it grow even tighter), Anne also fondly recounted significant milestones pertaining to their relationship, such as the day they met during a President's Day weekend, their first ceremony officiated by a gay minister decades earlier, or buying their first house. Much like other women who were coupled with men, she referred to her and her partner's differences and complementary personalities as an asset that helps maintain a desirable balance in the relationship.

She's a very shy person, until you get to know her. She doesn't really give of herself that much, and I'm a very outgoing person, and... umm... so we match each other pretty good that way, because she keeps me stable, I guess, as far as

“Settle down, just calm down, let’s talk it out, let’s figure it out,” you know.
(Anne, Caucasian, 65 years old)

At the same time, some women in heterosexual marriages attributed their relationship equilibrium to gender differences. Sarah, who had a “solid and very good” relationship with her husband of thirty years, situated their marriage within the non-denominational Christian religious context that they use as a reference for their roles. While cautiously using the term “submission” to describe her position within the couple, she also stressed the complementary, rather than unequal nature of their arrangement.

My husband is gentle, umm... strong, umm... and I think within that faith context there’s a concept of... of submission, but it’s in a sense that my husband is... serves me. He really has my best interest at heart, and my family’s best interests, making it very easy for me to say “I know this wouldn’t be asked” or “He wouldn’t consider this unless...” It’s a fitting together that’s complementary. We’re very different and there’s a balance within that relationship... I tend to be passionate, I’m not a neutral person, [...] and he is quiet and gentle, and yet, I mean, when he needs to be strong he is. (Sarah, Caucasian, 51 years old)

Kimberly, whose close friendship with her husband has revolved around raising a disabled child, similarly viewed him as the “man” who brings to the relationship specifically masculine traits.

He is just very easy-going, very sweet, umm... great husband, wonderful father. You know, I always called him a Rock of Gibraltar, because he was the really strong one, you know, when things would get bad, he... you know, he was just the father and the man. And where we deal with things, you know, as women, he dealt with them as a man, and... umm... I don’t think he was ever embarrassed or ashamed of our son, he just loved him. (Kimberly, Caucasian, 63 years old)

Like Sarah and Kimberly, Stephanie believed that women and men are radically different and voiced her expectation that men should be courteous and pay for her.

Within the context of her marriage, she was also very satisfied with the way she and her husband cohabitate and do complementary chores together.

We cohabitate well. I don't ever have to tell him "Jesus Christ, the garbage is overflowing!" He just knows to take it out when it's full. Umm... so we don't have any of those kind of issues. You know, he runs the vacuum, and I dust. We cohabitate very, very well together. We get along – we laugh. (Stephanie, Caucasian, 51 years old)

While many participants praised their significant other for being a major source of support, Jennifer and Margarita also credited their husbands with allowing them to engage in time-consuming projects such as going to school.

He's amazing, he's so supportive. When I said I wanted to go back to school he's like "OK, what do you need me to do? I'll take over this, I'll do that, I'll run the kids to school, I'll keep a quiet so you can do your homework, I'll start doing the shopping, I'll do the cooking" – he's just, he's incredibly helpful. And whatever I wanna do is perfectly fine with him, he's on board. He's a good guy. He really is. (Jennifer, Caucasian, 43 years old)

My husband... is, I can tell you that is everything, cause over here I live only with him and my doggie, but my husband supports me a lot, when I was studying or I was during really late in the night, he always came, "Do you want some coffee? Do you want something," and he supports me a lot. He said "You are studying, you are working," he did a lot of things in the house – he works anyways, but he knows I was doing extra effort, but he... I told you, I cannot live without him. Ha-ha-ha-ha, I can say that. (Margarita, Latina, 51 years old).

Another valued characteristic of some long-term relationships was longevity itself, which allowed women to know their partners on a deep level and become comfortable with the other person, as well as with themselves. As Sarah put it, after having been married to someone for a long time, "you can just be you."

There's, I think, too – we've been married 30 years this year, so there's a comfort that comes with that, an inexpressible comfort where yes, you still wanna keep yourself fit, you don't let everything go, but there's... you can just be you.

There's no putting on, umm... you read each other without words. (Sarah, Caucasian, 51 years old)

For Debbie, the most important thing about the twenty-six years long relationship with her husband is that he has known her for a very long time, has seen her develop, and knows her better than anyone else does. As she appreciated their shared history, Debbie also pondered the losses of dissolving a longstanding relationship.

He has history with me that no one else does. So... like when I have friends who... umm... or siblings who've been divorced, now when I hear that people... that couples get divorced, I think "Oh, they lost that part of themselves," you know, they don't have that, like memory of themselves, somebody walking around who is the memory of themselves. (Debbie, Caucasian, 46 years old)

Close bonds with another person such as the ones referred to above can be expected to serve as an important source of support as one ages. Yet, even recently formed relationships were sometimes perceived as valuable resources for the future. Elizabeth and Lynette, both in their sixties and divorced, were very surprised to come across new relationship opportunities later in life. Elizabeth, whose younger partner of two years shared her religious values and enthusiasm, thought of their relationship as "extremely important," along with the faith mission that circumscribed her interests. She also hoped that this person would eventually become her "life partner."

When I left my marriage, I was really certain that I would never be in a relationship again. Never be in a relationship again. Umm... but it happened to be, and it's... it's something that I'm... I'm cherishing and it's extremely important to me to have someone who's close to me that... or someone that I'm sharing my life with, just about. I mean, we are not living together, it's just someone who... umm... who is sharing that same conviction. (Elizabeth, Latina, 60 years old)

Lynette, who was living with her partner of one year, was also planning a future with him and anticipating the benefits of his companionship as they are getting older.

Definitely companionship, someone to go and do things with... And I think that's VERY, very important. Yeah. You know, someone just to interact with, you know. [...] But I think the companionship is... growing old together. And he's older than I am, so... No, it's very important. (Lynette, Caucasian, 63 years old)

Despite the positive effects of relationship closeness on one's outlook on aging, which will be discussed in more detail at a later point, with shared intimacy sometimes came anxiety about potentially outliving one's partner and being left alone. Because of such concerns, Emily insisted that her husband – or “boyfriend,” as she still calls him affectionately after thirty-three years of marriage – should take better care of himself to avoid a premature death.

I would say he's my best friend, umm... I call him boyfriend, he's... he's everything for me, we're very close. Umm... and sometimes I... I tell him, cause he's... he's a little overweight, and I tell him he needs to take care of himself, because I... I don't want to be left without him. And I do pray that when the Lord comes, he'll take us together, so I... I can't see myself being without him. (Emily, Latina, 55 years old)

Margarita, who thought about her husband of twenty-six years as being “everything” for her, especially considering that all the rest of her family is still in Guatemala, similarly felt very uneasy about the possibility of one day “something” happening to him.

Over here I told you, I have only my husband and I know... I feel sad if I think something happened to my husband, because he is everything for me, he's everything. [...] my husband spoils me a lot, I can tell you, he spoils me a lot, a lot. Things that other people don't do, he always during weekends says “Oh, don't cook. Let me go buy some food,” and he bring food. (Margarita, Latina, 51 years old).

As mentioned earlier, not all women who were married or involved in a relationship thought about it as a significant part of their identity. Olivia, a 48 year-old Latina with some high school education, and Teresa, a 65 year-old Latina with a high school degree had been with their husbands for decades, but did not mention their marriages among the aspects that define them. In fact, after recalling a particularly brutal and unexpected episode of physical abuse that she had endured from her husband, Teresa powerfully expressed her desire to maintain a separate identity: “I don’t wanna be like him. I wanna be me. Me.”

Even relationships that were not quite as dysfunctional as Teresa’s were sometimes regarded as less than optimal. Toni, a 58 year-old White woman with a doctorate had been married for a long time, but described her marriage as “superficial” and not a close relationship. Stephanie, who was quoted earlier as someone who cohabitates well with her husband, readily admitted to not seeing him as the love of her life.

I won’t say [my current husband is] the love of my life, I won’t say my ex-husband is the love of my life. Some people get that, and some people have to wait till next time – that’s my belief. (Stephanie, Caucasian, 51 years old)

A handful of participants were single and not seeing anyone at the time of the interview. Some of them, like Sandra and Norma, two divorced Latinas in their mid-fifties, were looking forward to finding a romantic partner in the future. Others, like Peggy, appeared to embrace singlehood as a permanent identity and expressed neither hope nor desire to enter an intimate relationship.

“I guess more just being single. [...] I just always had to be able to take care of myself, you know, and be self-reliant really. [...] Well, it’s just... it’s just, you know, it’s just my situation, you know. So I have just all this umm... umm... (pause) my... I’ve never been married, I mean I’ve so much of this, this is just what I know, you know... yeah.” (Peggy, Caucasian, 59 years old)

Helen, who had been divorced three times and viewed her ex-husbands as “just part of the places” she’d been stationed in while in the military, was unsentimental about marriage and made it clear that she had absolutely no intention of ever marrying again.

P: When I had [my daughter]... umm... her dad and I were not getting along – well, we hadn’t been getting along ever since we moved in together.

I: Was it your last husband? You said you had three divorces...

P: Yes, yes, it was my last... Yes, my most recent and my LAST! (laughing)
(Helen, Caucasian, 60 years old)

As shown in the above examples, there was considerable diversity not only in terms of participants’ relationship status, but also in the meanings they attached to couple relationships or marriage. Whereas for some women, their marriage or partnership was of utmost importance and conferred them a sense of continuity with their past and/or future, others were less emotionally involved in their relationship or even resented it. The outlook of those women who were single at the time of the interview also varied, from a desire to find romance to never wanting to get involved with a man again. Contrary to the expectation that White women and, in particular, middle-class ones would be the most invested in maintaining or securing romantic attachments, there were no clear patterns based on ethnicity, level of education, occupation, or income with regard to the role of intimate relationships in participants’ lives.

Other Family Identities

A relatively small number of participants invoked family relationships such as daughter, sister, or grandmother as one of their important identities. More specifically, seven women included being a sister and four being a daughter among the identities that defined them. Sometimes parents or siblings were significant as negative role models, or as people with whom the participants had an intense, but difficult relationship. Linda, for example, was adamant that she did not want to reenact her estranged parents' "negligence and abuse," whereas Olivia talked about having learned both what to do and what mistakes not to repeat as a result of how she was raised by her own mother. However, for other women, siblings and parents were a source of friendship and support. For instance, Jennifer felt "really, really close" to her sister who lives in town, while Anne reported being "very close" to her two younger sisters who live out of state, but with whom she emails and video conferences regularly. Margarita, whose entire family except her husband lives in Guatemala, confessed that her seven sisters are her real friends.

Similarly, Kerry talked about being "very close" to her mother and having a "friends" relationship with her. At the same time, close relationships with aging parents tended to involve helping or caring for them in various ways. In the case of Kerry's mother, whose health was "still fairly good," having Kerry's name on her bank account and insurance, or taking care of any problems with the homeowners' association seemed sufficient. In other circumstances like Susan's, who was helping care for her ninety-five year-old father, more drastic measures such as seeing him "AT LEAST twice a week" were warranted. Understandably, Susan felt that "to an extent" she was now parenting her own father.

All three participants who were grandmothers valued that identity and spoke fondly of their relationships with their grandchildren. Fifty-one year-old Stephanie, who initially could not conceive of herself as a grandmother and instead opted for the “nana” designation when her grandson was born, joyfully recounted her infinite patience with the four year-old boy. Crediting her grandson with having facilitated the complete cessation of her drug use as well as having improved the relationship with her husband, Stephanie concluded that he was the most important part of her life at that time: “Yes, my grandson definitely defines who I am these days.” Yet, she was mindful of the grandson’s impending growth and hoped that her being “just so nuts about him” would “taper off” once he begins to socialize more with his peers.

The other two grandmothers were in their sixties and more experienced in that role. Lynette, whose twelve grandchildren lived both in- and out-of-state, had mastered all available technologies to stay connected with them.

And I pretty much keep up with them on facebook, you know, so... But that’s okay, you know, every once in a while I’ll get that “Hi Grammy, what are you doing, how are ya,” you know, and it just makes you feel nice and connected, you know. (Lynette, Caucasian, 63 years old)

Teresa’s grandchildren were teenagers with ambitious career goals. As a sixty-four year-old Mexican immigrant with a high school degree, her major commitment was to support her grandchildren’s educational pursuits and guide them on their path to adulthood.

Embracing the grandmother identity was not confined to women who already had grandchildren, however. Most notably, three Latinas talked extensively about the meanings of grandmotherhood and looked forward to caring for future grandchildren. In

addition to expressing an interest in active grandmothering that was unmatched by that of White interviewees, Latinas also appeared more inclined to value their families in general, as opposed to only focusing on specific family ties.

Margarita, for example, viewed herself as a member of a large Guatemalan family characterized by mutual help and support. Teresa, another Hispanic immigrant, positioned her family as the most important thing for her and stressed the importance of helping one another: “That’s why we are family; we need to help each other.” Emily, who was born in Los Angeles to Hispanic parents, also emphasized the close ties within her American-based family:

We come from a very close family, and my brothers and sisters mean very much to me, and we’re close. And actually my older sister will be having surgery next month, and she lives in LA, and I will be traveling to be with her... umm... after her surgery. So, we... we are a close-knit family. (Emily, Latina, 55 years old)

Interestingly, one Caucasian woman who had been married to an Arab man for a long time and adopted his values regarding family connectedness was also very clear about such ties being the most important to her.

For me, my family is important – they are my friends. I have very few friends outside of my family. (Kerry, Caucasian, 49 years old)

Kerry’s exceptional circumstances notwithstanding, the high significance of grandmotherhood and family connections to Latina participants’ identities is consistent with the expectation, formulated on the basis of previous studies, according to which Hispanic women tend to have a particularly high investment in these types of relationships.

Friend

Half of the participants mentioned being a friend as a very important part of their lives. While the particularities of women's friendships varied somewhat (e.g., some had personal friends, whereas others shared their group of friends with a husband or a partner), a notable commonality was the long duration of those relationships. Indeed, most women reported having been connected to their friends for many years, often for decades. The process of growing together and sharing a variety of life events deepened and enriched many women's friendships. Several participants came to describe their friends as family members, denoting a level of closeness that is typically expected of blood connections.

Linda, for example, who was single at the time of our discussion and estranged from both her parents and her older son, felt very strongly about her friends and made it clear that they *were* her family.

I put friend sometimes as high as mother, it's of utmost significance to me, and in that my friends are my family. I don't believe that family starts or stops at a blood connection. So, the importance of friend is... is so, means so much to me that I strive to be the best friend that I can, but I also... I suppose expect a lot more (Linda, Caucasian, 44 years old)

Olivia, who was married but not closely connected to her husband, characterized her friendships as an opportunity to share life's joys and sorrows, or simply to have fun.

I have three friends, and my relationship with them is more than ten years – two of them, and the other one maybe six years – and I think so we are close in everything because we are almost the same age, so we talk about family, we talk about, you know, problems you have with the kids, and things you are going through, and things we like to do, and we just going out and have fun. (Olivia, Latina, 48 years old)

Among the women whose social group of friends included their husbands were Kimberly and Susan, both of whom were born in Reno and have lived in this area ever since. Kimberly felt “very lucky” to have her friendships, some of which have lasted “from elementary school all the way till now.”

We do have a big social group of friends because we’ve lived here all our lives, so we do like to, you know, travel with friends, and entertain with friends (Kimberly, Caucasian, 63 years old)

Susan, who along with her husband meets with their friends of at least twenty years “very, very regularly,” referred to them as her extended family and an invaluable resource to go through life with.

What I refer to as my extended family, my friendship family. These are people without whom I just can’t go on, they’re my support group, they’re my... my girlfriends, their husbands are my guy friends, and they are people with whom I pursue social activities, and political activities, and religious activities, and... and they are my greater group – our greater group, because they’re not just mine, they’re my husband’s too, we share these... these wonderful friends. [...] They’re my family, people I turn to in times of joy or sorrow... people who turn to me in those same times. [...] Our children have grown up together, we celebrated weddings, and graduations, and grandchildren. (Susan, Caucasian, 56 years old)

Anne similarly thought of the friends that she shared with her long-time partner as extended family, and explained that what she values most in a friend is being accepted for who she is (i.e., gay) and a positive outlook.

I have an extended family with my friends. [...] she’s had [Anne’s partner has had] several other long-term relationships, you know, our best friend was her partner, her lover, whatever, for three years before I came into the picture, [...] and we’ve been friends for 34 years, so, you know... (Anne, Caucasian, 65 years old)

She then proceeded to talk about the various ways in which she was helping her friends by taking care of their children, in addition to being engaged in more formal mentoring activities.

I work with Big Brothers Big Sisters, I've mentored young kids and... umm... my friend that's got her little girl, you know, she said she's raising on her own, so... you know, those kind of friends, I've got another one, she's just divorced and she's got three kids, so [...] I think I'm more their mother-figure, which is OK with me, you know, if they... I never had kids so that's cool, that's my family, you know. (Anne, Caucasian, 65 years old)

Helping others also formed the basis of Teresa's friendships. She recounted a compelling history of being there for other people during difficult times, and expected them to return the favor if she needed help. Given her precarious health and her marriage to a man who was himself sick as well as abusive, Teresa's investment in her friends appeared to reassure her that she would not be left to cope on her own if her health were to further deteriorate. At the time of the interview, she was supporting a long-term friend through a protracted fight with cancer.

I have friend for 25 years... We involved, I have one right now, we so close because she has cancer in the breast, and she fighting for. She is in chemo, couple times right now she is in chemo for I don't know how many times they giving chemo. And she stopped that for a few months, and... and then she starting again, but I admire her because she is a strong person. She's like 56, I guess, 54-56. And she start this eleven years ago, and we are together. And when she... not live close to me, but we talk in the phone, and always "What happened to you today?" and "No, you need to be strong, you need go to the doctor, you need to..." And she's do the same thing to me, we support each other. (Teresa, Latina, 64 years old)

However, not all friendship initiatives seemed to be reciprocated, and a number of participants pointed out the distinction between the people they considered friends versus acquaintances. Anne, who was quoted above in the context of her long-time friendships

and propensity to help others, was also dismayed by the lack of enthusiasm displayed by some purported friends, and decided to focus exclusively on those people who shared her eagerness to maintain the relationship.

Some of my acquaintances I've had for years, but I... this last year I decided I needed to only concentrate on the people that really, truly care for me, as well as I care for them, you know. All these other acquaintances, even though they said "Oh, I love you, Anne," or whatever, umm... never called, if I didn't instigate the conversation or the phone call, whatever, we never communicated. And I thought "Well, apparently they are more important to me than I am to them, so I'm just going to eliminate those people out of my life, the ones that I talk to all the time, those will stay." (Anne, Caucasian, 65 years old)

Lynette, who had recently moved from Las Vegas and was taking steps to connect with people at her new church, similarly drew the distinction between true friends and more casual connections.

I have some genuine friends, you know, umm... you know, sometimes you kind of lose track of those people that were just acquaintances, but the genuine friends – we stay friends even though I moved, you know, and now I'm starting to make some here, you know. (Lynette, Caucasian, 63 years old)

Of course, women usually credited the "genuine," rather than the casual friendships with making a difference in their lives. In this context, continuity, the other highly valued feature noted earlier, also served as a testimony of friendship authenticity. Sarah, who perhaps underestimated the commonality of long-term friendships such as hers, conveyed the closeness of those friendships by emphasizing the number of decades they had lasted.

I have a few really close friends, you know, and it's very rare that you can say you've had a friend over 30 years, and I have a few of those. (Sarah, Caucasian, 51 years old)

On the other hand, Jennifer's longstanding friendships had "suffered a bit" after a period of taking care of her injured husband, when she was also very busy with school and her two jobs. Nonetheless, she not only described her friendships as "very important," but also, without prompting, highlighted their crucial role during the aging process.

I think that as women, as we get older, I think our friendships become more and more and more important. I think that if... if there's anything that's gonna make you feel better about yourself or better about your age it's gonna be really solid friendships. Girlfriends are REALLY important when you get older. [...] My husband is wonderful, he's great – but, sometimes you just need to talk to your girlfriends, you know. So I think that that's probably the most... the key to good aging is friendships. (Jennifer, Caucasian, 43 years old)

The remarks quoted above are consistent with the unequivocal body of literature that has documented the positive effects of friendships in older women's lives (e.g., Jerrome, 1981; Stevens, 2001). In the present sample, a large portion of the participants appeared to have the types of close and lasting connections that can be expected to provide a valuable resource as they age. Moreover, women's friendships were not marginal to their identities, but instead played a central role in their existence and were sometimes considered more significant than family relationships. Thus, despite the common tendency to regard kinship ties as deeper and more enduring than friendships, as noted by Lillian Rubin (1985) in her suggestively titled book "Just Friends," many women were heavily invested in their friendships either as a substitute for, or as an addition to other family bonds.

Religion or Spirituality

The majority of the participants, with the exception of five women, indicated on the questionnaire that they were either “somewhat religious” or “very religious.” While the meanings of religiousness – or, in some cases, spirituality – varied from person to person, it was not surprising to hear half of the participants talk about this dimension as a central component of their identities. In a few instances, religious faith represented the main driving force behind women’s major life decisions and actions. Although religion and spirituality were invoked by both Caucasian and Latina women with a wide variety of educational and occupational backgrounds, such an identity seemed much more common among the Latina participants.

Perhaps the best illustration of dedication to religious goals was Elizabeth, who confessed that her relationship with God was “the “absolute priority and main component” of her life, as well as what guided her every day. Indeed, she had left a marriage that was inhibiting her “spiritual growth” and dedicated herself to volunteering within a church context. With regard to personal relationships, Elizabeth’s focus had switched from husband and children to surrounding herself with people who share her values and support her endeavors. Although she has “always had a belief in God,” her identity as a Christian has become increasingly important as she “matured” and “had life experiences” that helped her understand what she needed “to grow as an individual” and “as a follower of Christ.”

For Emily, another Los Angeles-born Latina woman who identified as a Seventh Day Adventist, pleasing God had similarly become a central life mission. Having lost one of her three sons, her goal was to eventually reunite with her family in heaven.

I wanna please God in any way I can. [...] And the bible says if you have a good heart... umm... you will get to the kingdom, and... and my son was a very good person when he passed away. So my goal in life is to be in heaven with my three sons and my husband and anyone else who wants to come. That's... that's my main goal. (Emily, Latina, 55 years old)

Religion also helped Kimberly cope with the losses and difficulties associated with having a disabled child. Although she was raised a Mormon and did not use to have much of a “personal relationship with Jesus,” she was introduced to a Christian church around the time her son was born. Not only did religion become “very, very” important to her from that time onwards, but she thought this was “God’s timing,” as “the Lord” opened her heart when she felt she could not “do it” by herself and “needed somebody stronger.”

Teresa, a Catholic, also thought that her faith in God was helping her greatly in dealing with life’s struggles and uncertainties, especially in the context of her deteriorating health.

I thank God to live for today, because I don’t know I’m going to wake up tomorrow. Every night I say “Thank for this, thank for my food, my family, my friends, my job,” for everything. [...] I think my faith in God is help me a lot. (Teresa, Latina, 64 years old)

As can be noticed in some of the above examples, it was not uncommon for participants’ understandings of religion to have crystallized during adulthood. Thus, a good number of women recounted life-altering transformations that had led them to their current beliefs. Moreover, whereas some participants identified with a specific religious denomination, others described a more idiosyncratic relationship with God that was not predicated upon institutionalized beliefs or practices. Norma, for instance, had developed

a very personal and egalitarian relationship with God that was based primarily on internal experiences, rather than on more conventional religious teachings.

One thing that I can say that is constant present in my person is my relationship with God. In a different ways in my life, first I was blaming him, as everybody, (laughing) every young people, about all my bad choices, my results, my things, but at some point [...] I found I have to create a relationship with God, no a servant or not... not a service from him to me. (laughing) And then I was thinking about God as the... as the part of my life that is my support, that is my... my source of strength. And... but I turn very respectful to him. I never have felt afraid of God, I don't believe in the bible things, because I think... God is not that, God is not that. (laughing) God is a source of light. And I cannot understand God in another way. And God always have been something very important for me. Now God is like my dude, my... my buddy. (laughing) Like my friend. (Norma, Latina, 54 years old)

In contrast to Norma's private approach, some women's religious beliefs were intertwined with social activities such as volunteering or making friends within a church context. In addition to her faith in God, Teresa was also highly involved in church activities and willing to do whatever she could to help others.

I like to go to church, and I like to participate with them, and when they lose somebody, like I say, I helping make the flowers, the prayers, and I like to be involved in my church when we do, you know, some of the special... umm... I say fiestas, or... you know, I like to help. I like to help in that. And plus I make good tamales (laughing) and thing, when we do that, you know, they say "What you wanna do Teresa?" "I like to make the tamales." [...] I like to be involved in church, and like I say, you know, the community... (Teresa, Latina, 64 years old)

Sarah, a nondenominational Christian with a Jewish family background, thought of God as a relationship in her life and was an "avid purveyor." With regard to social life, the message of the Titus woman from the scripture had taught her about the mutual love and support that younger and older women need to provide to each other. Thus, she

talked extensively about her reaching out to women of different generations, and reflected upon the barriers that often keep the generations “segregated.”

These older women in my life – I make sure that I check on them, it keeps them vital. Umm... and a lot of times we don't wanna go where they're at, it's... it's a reminder of where we may be, and I see them in a positive light... umm... but... very much so, I think it really integrates the generations.

I'm participating in your research cause I wanna see you do well, and you should have, you know, interaction and to see what's there and what you can put out to... to be the best you can. Part of that is what I give back to younger generations, in turn to listen to me and to say “You have value to me, I want to hear what you have to say.” Feeds into what I have to offer for my life experience through aging. (Sarah, Caucasian, 51 years old)

In conclusion, religion and spirituality not only played an important role in many participants' lives, but were also credited with helping women cope with various adversities, including age-related issues such as declining health. Moreover, Sarah's example illustrates that religious beliefs can sometimes inspire actions meant to transcend intergenerational barriers and enhance one's own, as well as other people's aging experiences.

Volunteer

The majority of the participants indicated that they were engaged in a variety of community activities, and many also took part in political actions such as calling senators or congress people, or working to support candidates during electoral campaigns. For half of the women in this sample, their community and/or political engagements were particularly meaningful and represented a major component of their identities.

In general, women recognized volunteering as an activity that is at least as useful for the giver as it is for the receiver, with some of the benefits mentioned being balance and perspective, happiness, social engagement, and even an opportunity to “age well.”

On the other hand, lack of time to do (the desired amount of) volunteer work was invoked as a major frustration by a few of the younger participants who were employed and sometimes also going to school. Linda, for example, who was finishing college in her mid-forties and continuing with a graduate degree program, described volunteering as very important for her psychologically. Although she still had numerous community engagements and leadership roles, she had been forced to give up some volunteering prospects because of time constraints.

That's [volunteer is] my third identity and that one is so incredibly important and it gives me balance, and it gives me perspective. And if I could survive being a volunteer, then I would never get a paid job. [...] And kind of any time I get an opportunity, so it's more like I have to say no, and teach myself to say no. I became very overwhelmed for a while, I've been on the boards of lots of agencies, but then little things come up and sometimes it's feast or famine... (Linda, Caucasian, 44 years old)

For older participants like Anne, retirement had brought the opportunity to finally pursue the volunteering activities that she had always wanted to do, but “never had the time.” In addition to volunteering for several organizations within the community, she was also “politically active” and doing “a lot of [...] letter writing, emailing, and phone calls for various projects” that she thought were important. Susan, another retiree, had a passion for “feeding people,” and her retirement career involved getting a culinary degree and becoming a teaching chef. Her feeding projects included working with various charitable groups, as well as cooking for her friends and (Jewish) community.

I feed those who are not so fortunate, I feed those who are members of our community, I feed our friend group, I feed... I feed people, it's what I do, I like to feed people. That's very important to me, to feed people. It's, it's very satisfying, you know, what better to make... to make sure that somebody you know has a full stomach and is satiated, and happy, and all the rest of it. And, food tastes good. (Susan, Caucasian, 56 years old)

On several occasions, women with demanding schedules also reported having managed to contribute to others in meaningful, if sometimes small, ways. Debbie, a full-time college student, believed that she had something to give to other people, even to those that she talked with briefly. While this belief had not been present before her middle years, she now felt compelled to be aware when she can be encouraging or a positive influence, rather than a negative or no influence. Two examples of her actions meant to exert a positive influence were encouraging her (much younger and sometimes insecure) colleagues at school, or greeting the bus driver in a friendly manner. Peggy, a professional who spent much time on her job, could simply not conceive of not actively supporting the values that she strongly believed in.

I really can't imagine being a Republican. (laughing) It's really hard, I just couldn't imagine that. Umm... so I think that's tied in the value system, you know [...] things you can do that sort of... umm... allow you to make a contribution based on your values system. (Peggy, Caucasian, 59 years old)

As mentioned in the previous section on religious identities, some women like Elizabeth and Teresa were very active carrying out charitable projects or helping others in a church context. According to Teresa, her generosity was not only beneficial to others (i.e., church members, family, and friends), but also allowed her to be happy and avoid loneliness as she got older.

I wanna be happy, I wanna be friendly, and I wanna be helpful. To my friends, my family, to everybody need me. I don't wanna be a negative person, a mean person, and not doing nothing for nobody. Only me, me, me, I don't think I am that kind, and I don't wanna be that kind. [...] And my age help me my attitude, because otherwise I don't think if I can live by myself be mean person. You know what I mean, because I'm not going to be happy, I'm going to hate everybody, and even me maybe, because not having nobody around you is hard. Because I see people, you know, nobody go to visit them, or talk to them, or nothing – how they can be happy? (Teresa, Latina, 64 years old)

Similarly, Sarah, a nurse who was seeking ways to make a difference in other people's lives and leave a legacy, believed that giving to others is an essential part of a positive aging experience.

That concept of generativity is really crucial at this season of life. You know, you... you wanna reflect on your life and know that it counted, that it made a difference for someone else, and that the future generations coming up, you know, it's kind of that legacy – a lot of that is giving a piece of yourself so that it goes on, and on... And that wonderful things happen in our world because you... not that I'm gonna make a big change, but if I could be a catalyst for that, to evoke change, would be good. [...] And I think that's the... that whole generativity – you reach back, you make a difference, you give a part of yourself, umm... where it's not selfish. Not that my name has to be known, but that it made something better for someone else. I think that's a... a real deep desire, and figuring out where you plug in. (Sarah, Caucasian, 51 years old)

In conclusion, volunteering, making a difference, or simply helping others in need were salient dimensions of many women's identities, whether or not they had the time to engage in such activities extensively during the period of their lives when they were interviewed. In addition to benefiting others, women saw giving as a way to increase their own connectedness and self-satisfaction, which were deemed particularly important in the context of aging. Perhaps because of such perceived gains, volunteering was also mentioned frequently as a future identity that participants valued. Thus, giving to others and its implications for women's aging experiences will also be discussed in a further section focused on projected identities.

Career and Education

Almost half of the participants mentioned their career or educational pursuits as something that they valued greatly. In general, the women who were highly invested in their careers were Caucasian or Latina professionals with a high level of education. For

example, Sarah described passionately the combination of academic and personal skills required for her specialized nursing position.

Although it's a scientific field, it also is something I think that people have a definite character for, where you tend to be a caring, nurturing person, and out of that base and your giving characteristics you are able to grow on that [...] And there's critical thinking, particularly the field I'm in is considered more of a critical care field. (Sarah, Caucasian, 51 years old)

Margarita, who had always been a top student in school and in college and managed to overcome many obstacles despite her very poor family background, was highly invested in her job in the field of education. She described herself as responsible, loyal, and as having high standards for her work performance. The discrimination that she faced in this country pushed Margarita to work even harder to prove her capabilities.

Some people, some teachers discriminating me because I was Hispanic and I didn't speak English, and they told me a lot of bad things about me, and that's why I said OK, they touch my feelings and I said "I will be the better, I will try, I will do things better" and that's why, that's make me go more... Yeah, more motivated, cause there's no... they cannot discriminate me. I have accent and they can deal with my accent, but I have the intelligence to do any job. And I think that's why some people... when they see us working here, using computer, doing a job that other people who born over here should to do it – "How come this little, short Hispanic doing this?" (Margarita, Latina, 51 years old)

While there were a number of successful professionals like Sarah and Margarita in the sample, not all women who valued their profession had been able to achieve a lucrative career. Fifty-eight year-old Toni possessed a PhD, but her emotional investment in her field was not accompanied by the attainment of a financially rewarding position. On the other hand, some of the less educated participants also valued their jobs, though not necessarily because of their intrinsic rewards. Teresa, a high school graduate, liked to

work, but an additional incentive to remain employed at the age of 64, despite a number of health problems, was fear of losing her health insurance.

Likely because the recruitment methods for this study included flyers posted on a university campus, middle-aged women as non-traditional college students were well represented in the sample. Two such women were Linda and Jennifer, whose descriptions of their student roles were almost identical.

I have very high standards for myself as a student, and I take that role very seriously, I'm not employed and I chose to leave the work force to go back to school, and my job is my student life. (Linda, Caucasian, 44 years old)

Student is a very important role for me. I take it very seriously, I LOVE my classes, I mean even writing reports, and homework, and deadlines, and research, and just... I love it. The more, the better. If I could go full-time, I would. (Jennifer, Caucasian, 43 years old)

Debbie, another full-time college student who felt that "changing careers" defined her "very strongly," had initially doubted her ability to perform as well as her younger colleagues. However, her fears had proven unfounded and she was completely satisfied with her decision to switch fields.

It's been interesting coming back to school, I was a little nervous because a lot of things have changed, like even just the knowledge of [her field] has changed in the past 20 years... Not dramatically, but some things. And I thought, "Oh, maybe I'm old and I won't be able to learn very quickly," or... umm... "All the students will be so much younger than me," "I'll have professors who are younger than me, how will that be?" But I really like it. I was afraid I would feel old, but I don't. I feel really, really lucky. (laughing) That's how I feel, really lucky. (Debbie, Caucasian, 46 years old)

As will be discussed later, women who were invested in their schooling or career at the time of the interview also tended to think about these activities as significant in the future, which in turn seemed to influence participants' feelings about aging either

positively or negatively, depending on how likely career success was perceived to be with advancing age.

Other Valued Components of the Self

Although women's conceptions of themselves typically fell into the identity categories described thus far, there were also a number of interesting additions that are worth mentioning. These valued components of the self often seemed untied to others and, given their lack of social anchoring, did not constitute identities per se. Moreover, they were very individualized and typically invoked by only one participant.

One such participant was Helen, who described her painting, crafts, and various hobbies as things that truly define her. Helen's interests tend to fluctuate over time, but they include theoretical physics, philosophy, New Age stuff, writing poetry (every now and then), writing the "Great American Novel" (had been doing that for years), anthropology, and paleontology. While she talked extensively about her numerous interests, the following quotations are illustrative of the sorts of activities she enjoys.

I paint, and I do crafts, so I think of myself that way.
 I have this one oil lamp that it took me... I think it was five years to get all the parts together, because I get "Uh, there's a neat base and I think it'll fit!" (laughing) And it might and it might not; if it didn't I just put it in the storage and I thought "Well, some time it'll fit some other lamp." I finally got this lamp all put together and I LOVE it!
 And... I like to get out and go for walks, but... not... I like to go by myself, early in the morning, and walk for a few miles, and I have my canteens and I bought... yeah, I do have some of the gear that I had in the army, I have my backpack with frame, and I have my pistol belt with the canteens, and the... and I go out with my canteens so I can stay out there for a while and... umm... I have my backpack so that when I find "Uh, that's a cool feather!" or "That's a neat rock!" I just stick them in my backpack. And I have lots of baggies and... (laughing) Well, I have big tackle boxes just full of feathers. [...] And I make dream catchers, and sometimes make wands, or walking staffs or things that I put rocks or feathers or stuff that I found in and... So, it's not like they all go in storage, but... I can have a lot of rocks under my bed, I have to admit. (Helen, Caucasian, 60 years old)

Helen also spoke about having always felt that she “could do anything,” and mentioned her grandmother, a homesteader, and her mother as role mothers that inspired her to be a free person. Rejecting the “feminist” label that some people ascribed to her, she explained that her freedom simply meant doing what she wanted when “there wasn’t any reason why I shouldn’t be able to do it.” For her future, Helen envisaged a life with chickens, geese, goats, a vegetable garden, and fruit trees. She dreamed about living on three acres, away from people, and making goat cheese, drawing, and painting. Despite being perceived as “nice” by others, she confessed that she had “never liked being around people” and would “rather get along WITHOUT them.”

Amy, a comedian, shared some of Helen’s interests such as writing and painting, and saw herself first and foremost as an artist. However, unlike Helen’s solitary retreats, Amy’s artistic endeavors were profoundly social, and their meanings were derived largely from her interactions with other people. Mentoring teens, another activity that she was very fond of, combined her artistic inclinations with the desire to exert an influence on others.

I think, if anything truly defining me, truly, truly is artist. Because I think being an artist, I can mentor someone and I’m artistically doing it, I think everything’s... I always try to look at things and see that there’s art to everything. (laughing) [...] Being a comedian and doing all that other stuff outside [...] makes me happy. It really makes me happy to see people laugh or cry when it’s something that I’ve said, or... umm... or a mentor inspiring a young kid to maybe go “Well, I really like to paint,” “Well, then be an artist.” [...] I guess I’m just good with people, like that’s sort of what it all boils down to. (Amy, Caucasian, 40 years old)

For a couple of women, intellectual activities represented major components of their selves. Kerry, a college graduate who had given up graduate school dreams to

support her children's educational pursuits, talked about her high need for intellectual stimulation.

I have to stay learning something. [...] Having intellectual stimulation is very important to me. [...] I read, I... I have a strong curiosity, if someone tells me about something that I don't know anything about, I have to go look it up, and read, and learn about it. (Kerry, Caucasian, 49 years old)

Debbie similarly described her intellect and ability to think as very important, and saw herself as "a very intellectual," as well as "a very self-centered person." One component of Debbie's abstract endeavors referred to making sure that she is being frequently challenged, and having opportunities to grow as a result.

And something that also, that through my life that I've come... that's come to be very important to me is to be moving forward, and... and changing, and growing, and trying... always trying something challenging, and... umm... I... often when I have some kind of conflict about which path to take, I remember I don't want to just do the easy thing, because I think that... I will regret that later. If I just do the easy thing. So, [...] that's important to me. To know that I am working in a direction that is challenging to me. And... I want to be... umm... continuing to develop. (Debbie, Caucasian, 46 years old)

Personal growth was also mentioned by Sandra, albeit in a different context. For this accomplished professional aged fifty-four, self-development involved activities such as sewing her own clothes and dancing, which she thought were made possible by her aging and having grown children that do not demand her time.

Finally, life experiences had taught Norma to view balance, rather than specific roles or identities, as the most important quality of her current existence.

At this point, I can tell you my key word for my life, for my self conception is balance. [...] I say balance because my life experience has been a little bit unbalanced in some periods of my life. Eh... men was the most important thing, in another time to be a mom, only a mom, in another point only work, in another point... then, at this point that's why I'm telling you, at this point I think all of the

points define me. I like to work, I like to study, I like to be a mom, I am improving my skills as a sister. (Norma, Latina, 54 years old)

As suggested by these latter examples, women's perceptions of what is important often emerged as an outcome of previous transformations such as changing life circumstances (e.g., no longer being a caregiver to one's children), or developing a new perspective on what truly matters. Past changes in women's valued identities constitute the focus of the next section, in which participants' relinquished identities are analyzed to provide a better understanding of the context in which their current worldviews were formed.

Relinquished Identities and Values

When asked to recall any identities that used to be important to them in the past but were no longer significant, most participants did not merely reference relinquished identities such as wife or student. Instead, there was often an associated set of values that had once informed their core identities, which had also been abandoned. For example, rather than simply invoking their previous identity as wife, women typically talked about a set of values (i.e., traditional marriage) associated with that identity that they no longer subscribed to. Therefore, this section addresses both identities and values that women had let go of over the years. In general, past identities and values reflected a focus on meeting external expectations, whether they were related to marriage and family life, physical appearance and social demeanor, career, education, or the attainment of material things.

The abandonment of various socially defined standards and goals suggests a form of liberation similar to that described by authors such as Germaine Greer (1992), whereby

conformity to expectations regarding proper womanhood can be replaced by an inward journey towards wisdom and serenity. In Greer's account, however, the post-menopausal woman's choice to seek peace internally is, at least to some extent, a response to being rendered useless and invisible by society. Unable to continue her reproductive role or to attract the attention of men the way that she used to, the middle-aged woman may either desperately try to recreate her lost youth, a path that is undoubtedly doomed to failure, or decide to disengage from the roles assigned to her by patriarchy and pursue a new type of freedom, one that is less dependent upon external circumstances or social approval. Of course, other feminists such as Harris (1975) or, more recently, Calasanti and Slevin (2006) have questioned whether women can simply detach themselves from the negative stereotypes surrounding them, and pointed out the losses associated with getting older.

In contrast to the scenario depicted by Greer (1992) and also unlike the limited options perceived by other authors, lack of choice did not appear to be the main reason that drove middle-aged women in this study to leave behind some of their earlier, oppressive identities or values. Rather, the accumulation of life experiences and a growing understanding of what truly mattered to them personally was often the catalyst in women's transitioning from an externally defined, traditional existence to a life in which aspirations were more tailored to their own preferences. For example, in the case of the traditional marriage ideal that several women abandoned, there was widespread recognition that conforming to the wife role as they had originally understood it was limiting in terms of personal freedom, and therefore unfulfilling. Consequently, that type of relationship was no longer pursued by many of the participants, even when they felt that entering a traditional marriage might have been possible at their age. Instead,

singlehood or alternative close relationship arrangements, as envisioned by each woman on the basis of her specific needs, were often regarded as more desirable options. Several women whose first marriages seemed very much alike in that they revolved around pleasing their husbands and dedicating themselves to their children articulated a range of unique expectations with regards to their existing or potential partners. For instance, one devout woman who had left her husband could not imagine a close relationship with someone who did not share her religious convictions and enthusiasm, whereas for another participant, being able to maintain her identity separate from her husband's was a significant mark of a healthier second marriage. In a few cases, single motherhood was also portrayed as more desirable than having one's freedoms curtailed within a less than satisfactory marriage.

As will be discussed later, some of the shifts in values described in this chapter can help explain the primarily positive feelings that many participants reported in relation to aging. Perhaps most importantly, not caring so much about others' opinions and about physical appearance allows women to not only maintain favorable views of themselves even as their bodies increasingly depart from the culturally mandated beauty ideal, but also to experience more contentment and self-acceptance than during their youth, when many were consumed with trying to meet narrow standards of beauty and behavior. In the following, I present each of the main themes related to women's past identities and values, which are endorsement of a traditional marriage ideal; trying to please others and caring about what other people think; worrying about physical appearance; work and getting ahead in one's career; education and learning for the sake of getting a degree; and material things.

Traditional Marriage Ideal

Five interviewees portrayed the marriage ideal envisioned (and often accomplished) during their youth as no longer attractive to them. A recurrent concern regarding traditional marriage arrangements was the expectation that women define themselves primarily in relation to their husband and children, thereby losing their identities as unique individuals. While this observation has been frequently articulated in the feminist literature and is commonly associated with a White, middle-class perspective (see Betty Friedan's well-known book on this topic), the critique of women's subservience in marriage was not confined to a specific ethnic or social class category in this study. Thus, very similar trajectories that involved participating in traditional marriages and then questioning their value have been recounted by both Caucasian and Latina women with a variety of social class standings. Whether the ending of participants' first marriages was involuntary or initiated by the women themselves in an attempt to escape a confining situation, the common belief expressed by the women in their forties, fifties, and sixties quoted below was that a rigidly defined relationship was no longer worthy of their efforts.

For Linda, a college student who had been divorced twice and was single and not seeing anyone at the time of the interview, the initial transition from what she thought would be an everlasting marriage to single motherhood was completely unexpected. That abrupt change forced her to revisit her conception of "a perfect life," and in the process she got to discover and increasingly cherish the advantages of living and making decisions independently. Not only did that discovery lead to an easy transition into single

motherhood after her second divorce, but she also came to embrace independence and single parenthood as potentially long-term, fulfilling alternatives to marriage.

When I married my first husband I thought it was a forever thing, maybe a little bit of that romantic ideological kind of thing... but I figured that would be forever, I never once in my life pictured myself as a single parent. But with my daughter, I almost went into it as a single parent and relished it, and thrived in it. Yeah, it was really nice, it was different. I was just in a different place at that point – maturity I guess, cause they're ten years apart. [...] and I got rid of that... I guess that dream of what a perfect life is.

I was young when I married, but I wasn't so young – I was 22 and I was 23 when I had our son, so I was a little bit older, but to me like I was still young, but... I don't know, I think I'm really good at change, and I don't think it really affected me that badly. Yeah, there was the grieving that I went through, yeah, and of all of that, the end of that dream and then the new reality that came about, the single parent – at that time I was also a full time student and... I don't know, that was the easy transition. I felt [...] like I could still be a parent and... and yeah, I take away the husband, that doesn't take away my identity, my identity's still there. (Linda, Caucasian, 44 years old)

Similar sentiments were expressed by Stephanie, a high school graduate who had left a traditional first marriage in which her identity had been tied to pleasing her husband. The unsatisfactory personal experience with that marriage, along with moving to a slightly larger town with less traditional values, led the participant to seek a more fulfilling way of living. She experienced the aftermath of her divorce as a second adolescence in her early forties, characterized by a renewed sense of freedom and self-discovery. Although remarried at the time of the interview, Stephanie made it clear that the relationship with her second husband allowed her to maintain a separate identity, and that she was no longer on her “husband's track,” as she had been with her first husband. Much like Linda, she was not afraid of her younger husband hypothetically leaving, and in fact confessed her lack of desire to reattach herself to any other man if the relationship were to end.

I always thought I needed a man in my life, you know, all through my... I was eighteen when I got married, graduated one weekend, got married the next, cause that's what you did. At least that's what I thought you were supposed to do – I mean, Carson City, a little tiny town, little tiny eye views of the world. I mean, I moved to Reno when I left my husband twelve years ago and... you know, it's not like Reno's this huge city or anything, but compared to Carson City at that point, it was. And... you get more viewpoints, you know... [...] So, I think that I've grown a lot from my forties to my... I'm now 51, I think I've grown a lot as a person and an individual, as far as knowing what I wanted my life to be, what I want people to remember if I die tomorrow about me, umm... between 40 and 50. Before that... hmm, I think I was just an... I think I was on my husband's track. People say to me today "You gave up Dan for Peter?" "Yeah, I did." Because it was all his way, it was like I evolved from Stephanie into Dan. You know, it was Stephanie-Dan or Dan-Stephanie, what I mean – no, I'm Stephanie, and he's Peter. And I like that waay better. But it was like, you know, I guess I allowed myself to... cause I thought that... you know, my mother was like that, my mom was like, my dad would come home from work and my mom would be "Coffee, tea, or me!" – you know, what do you need, what can I get you, dadadadada, and that's how I was, you know, I thought "Oh, he'll be happier if I'm a better cook, if I take these French cooking lessons, or my house looks better, or my garden grows better." [...] You know, I guess I was always searching for something to make my... my worth more, you know. [...] Once I got out from underneath, you know, that and I was really – "I'm 40 years old and I can do what the hell I want," I mean, I was like a teenager! That's how I acted, and so I went insane, I guess, and that's why I started doing drugs, and, you know, running around with this young guy – I mean, he was 25 then, I was 40! (Stephanie, Caucasian, 51 years old)

For Elizabeth, a 60 year-old Hispanic woman who had been married for twenty years before finally divorcing, the greatest regret about her marriage was not having ended it sooner. Given her and her husband's families' very traditional values, getting married seemed like "the thing to do" when she got pregnant immediately after high school. Although she, like Stephanie, had initially prioritized the wife/mother role above all else and sacrificed her spiritual needs for the sake of the family, her priorities evolved considerably over the years. After their two children left the home, her faith and volunteering became increasingly important and she eventually decided to divorce her

husband, who was not fully sharing her enthusiasm in those areas. At the time of our discussion, Elizabeth's absolute priority was her faith (including volunteering in the church context), as well as her new partner, who supported her in those endeavors and would potentially become her life partner.

It was important to me to be a very good mother. It was important to me to be a... a very supportive wife, umm... an encouraging wife, and that stayed, umm... for 20 years, I mean, I... even to this day, as angry as my son is with me, and my daughter has some... her own personal issues, they've said "You were the best mom," or "We had the best growing up," or "We had such a wonderful foundation," and... so that was very, very important to me.

And now, it's not so important to me. I'm glad that I did that and I'm glad that they were always my priority when they were growing up and during their formative years, but that's not important to me now. Umm... in fact, when I look back and I think... and they say "We had such a great growing up," I think to myself "If I had been a stronger person you would have had a better growing up," you know, I think that I could have... umm... I stayed in the marriage longer than I should have. [...] I have some guilt from that, but I've come to terms with that and just... I'm trying to move on and move forward with it.

My priorities [...] were them, my family, and then as my children left, then it was... I had tried to be my husband, but it became too one-sided, then it became my husband and my [...] faith, and then it became more about me and my faith, and now it is strictly about me and my faith, and perhaps what will be my life partner, I'm not sure at this point. (Elizabeth, Latina, 60 years old)

Sandra, another Latina who had been divorced twice, described her first marriage in Mexico as not just stifling personal growth, but as outright abusive. Although she had really wanted to be "a good wife," the abuse that she attributes to the patriarchal Mexican culture made her "resign" from that role. In an attempt to free herself and their two children from what she saw as the negative influence of her first husband, she put the wife role "in the garbage can." While the prospects of finding an egalitarian relationship in that culture seemed very limited, especially as a divorcee, Sandra's subsequent

relationships with Anglo men, including her second marriage that also ended, sustained her optimism about finding an intimate partner in this country.

“I wanted to be a wife. When I got married for the first time and I tried with all my life, like everything that I do, and the only thing that I got was abuse, then I... eh... resigned from this thing. [...] When I try with all my life to be a good wife, with the same intensity that I wanted to be a good mother and a good professional, and the only thing that I get was abuse from a man, and that is very... eh... aligned with my culture and with “I don’t care what you need, I don’t care what you think, I don’t care anything, you just are an object” – that if you have feelings, nobody cares about it, if you have emotions... you can even work, and bring money, or not, or whatever. And I didn’t think bad about men, yeah. I just thought “Well, no, this is something that’s not gonna be in my priorities anymore.” And put it in the garbage can. (Sandra, Latina, 54 years old)

Finally, the involuntary dissolution of her marriage led Lynette, a former wedding chapel manager who had recently moved to Reno from Las Vegas, to go through a crisis that would change her worldview. Whereas “being married and having a family” was very important to her in her twenties, following a traumatic divorce she has learned to adapt to life changes, rather than fighting them. Recently, and very unexpectedly, she has found another partner that is very important to her.

P: In my twenties, you know, being married and having the family, and... umm... having all that work, and then when it all falls apart you become very depressed and takes you a while to get back up on your feet, lift yourself off.

I: Did you have a more traditional sort of idea of wanting to get married [...]?

P: Well, yeah – and, you know, the white picket fence and the curtains in the window, and, you know, the bowl of fruit on the kitchen table, and... I had thought that’s what it was, but... And then, bring them to Las Vegas, an adult Disney Land – not good. No, that marriage didn’t last long once we came to Vegas, you know, cause it was just... just waay too much for him to comprehend, you know. And, you know, you’re pretty bitter after that, and it takes a long time to... to let all that anger go. [...] So once I let all that hatred go, I was a much better person.

Yeah, you gotta be able to go with the change, you know. And some people don’t do change too well. (laughing) Over the years I’ve learned change comes often, you know. (Lynette, Caucasian, 63 years old)

Pleasing Others

Closely related to the traditional marriage ideal is the notion that women's primary responsibility is to please others, whether by acting or looking a certain way. Not surprisingly, several participants recounted a strong desire to fulfill various social expectations such as being nice to people when they were younger. However, the initial focus on pleasing others, including parents, husband, children, or society at large had already been left behind by the middle-aged interviewees who brought up this topic.

Anne, a 65 year-old White woman who identifies as gay contrasted her younger years, when she always tried to be the “good child, responsible person” and worried about people not liking her to her current state, in which she knows who she is, is confident in herself, and does not mind rejection from others. Whereas before coming out at age thirty pleasing her family was of utmost importance to Anne, leading her to try dating several men, she has for a long time organized her life around relationships and activities that she genuinely values (i.e., partner, sister, friend, and volunteer), rather than ones imposed by others.

When I was younger, [...] I was always trying to be the good... good child, responsible person. [...] Yeah, I... this is who I am – you don't like it, that's your problem, but this is the way I am. If you don't want to be friends with me, OK, I'm... I've got other things to do, you know, I'm not gonna... I always worried, “Will they like me or won't they?” You know, and that's even before I came out, you know. Umm... but I feel I reached the age where, you know, this is who I am. I'm a... I try to be honest, truthful, and the best person I can be. I'm a brash, outspoken, swear-too-much person, but that's who I am. And... I'm not making apologies (Anne, Caucasian, 65 years old)

Stephanie, another Caucasian woman who was raised to be “a good girl” and always nice to others concluded, based on life experiences, that “it doesn't really get you

anywhere.” In her case, opposition to restrictive behavioral expectations was followed by a temporary lapse into drug addiction in her forties, which she views as a manifestation of her newly found freedom.

And I used to be this manicurist and I had the personality to go with it, and I was nice to everyone, nice, nice, nice, I was a really nice person. I don't wanna be nice anymore so much, and I've kind of found through the years that it doesn't really get you anywhere. That's just how I was – I think that I just... my parents just raised me to be a good girl. I was a good girl, you know, I didn't do bad things, I... my parents didn't have to call the police on me or... anything like that, nothing – I mean, I think I was on restriction twice when I was a teenager, I just... And I was smart, so... and I was the last one after four, so I kind of knew how to work my parents, but I just didn't want to be bothered with any of that stuff – being bad. And then when I turned 40 it was like “Huh – jeez, crack heads are kind of fun.” (Stephanie, Caucasian, 51 years old)

Physical Appearance

Whereas the above participants talked about pleasing others in the broader sense of acting in ways that are socially expected, some women referred more specifically to physical appearance as the means to meet external expectations and thereby also feel better about themselves. These women indicated that physical appearance used to be a major consideration in the past, but was no longer important to them. The sources of this transformation were largely internal and involved a notable increase in self-confidence, paralleled by a diminished concern with pleasing others or caring about what other people think. At the same time, changes in life circumstances such as no longer needing to project a certain image in the workforce also played a role in facilitating these women's transition to an existence defined by personal abilities rather than by external beauty.

Debbie, a full-time college student in her forties remembered how she used to “really worry” about what she wore when she was going to college as a traditional student. Investing large amounts of resources in her looks continued after she got married, until she finally gave up this preoccupation to devote more time and energy to her son. Her current lack of concern with physical appearance is reinforced by her belief that other people are too busy with their own lives to judge her looks, whether positively or negatively.

P: One thing that really... that I noticed going back to college and being around really young people is like how much young people care about how they look, their image to others. You know, and like I see some of the women come into my class in the morning, and they're late. And I look at them and I'm pretty sure they're late because they were getting dressed, because they look really nice, you know. Every aspect, you know, they did probably change three blouses, and decided if they're gonna wear the sleeves cuffed or down, or... you know, their hair up, or how much of this, [...] and I don't even think about that. I think “Oh it's hot, I gotta wear something cool, so I'll wear a skirt.” You know, that's all I think. But I remember, when I see them now I remember – oh, I used to really worry about what I wore, and how other people would... what they would think if they looked at me. Even after I was married, you know, you think maybe that behavior is just so that you would get a husband or a mate, you know, a partner for life, but even after that I worried about that for a long time.

I: And how did... when did that change?

P: I think when I was with my son, when I had my son, and then I just... that's one of the things I gave up, so that I could give more time and more energy to him, was thinking about what other people... And I... and it's not that I think that other people look at me and judge me badly, I just realize now “Other people aren't... don't have that much time to care about me, you know.” (laughing) They aren't thinking about me, they're thinking about their own lives, you know. If I smell bad, then they would notice, you know. But otherwise... (laughing) I just realized that we all have other things to do than that. (Debbie, Caucasian, 46 years old)

In the case of 56 year-old Susan, maintaining a professional appearance was to some extent a practical consideration while she was still operating in the business world. In addition to no longer having to project a certain image in that world, she believes that

aging itself has enabled her to become more comfortable in her own skin (i.e., happy with herself and unaffected by whether others accept her or not). Thus, the lessening of work-related demands on her looks was accompanied by an increased acceptance of self made possible by life lessons learned over the years. Whereas in her youth she used to evaluate herself primarily based on physical appearance, her abilities to be a good mother, wife, friend, and daughter are more important to how she views herself now.

P: When I was younger and I was in business, umm... appearance was very important to me. And, I just don't care so much anymore. I don't need to present a person who will be initially judged, or... or who will be viewed based upon appearance.

I no longer care what people think of my appearance. I'm happy with me, and people can either accept me or not, it will not affect my reality, it won't affect my friends or my family. Umm... so I no longer need to have very expensive fashionable clothes and shoes and, you know, the hair and the makeup all the time, it... it just doesn't matter, it is unimportant in my life. So that used to be something, and now it's just not.

I: And why do you think this changed, what contributed to this?

P: Acceptance of self, I think, security in self. I think, when I was younger, umm... because I was unsure, because life hadn't taught me some of the lessons it has since taught me, I... chose to base my persona first on appearance and then on ability, and that has since flipped. So that my abilities, umm... which I include my ability to be a good mother, a good wife, a good friend, a good daughter, are more important to me than the trappings, any of the other trappings. And I think that's just... that's a function of age, to get to that comfortable in your own skin kind of place. [...] I guess some people are fortunate enough to figure it out in their twenties, I was not one of those people. (laughing) (Susan, Caucasian, 56 years old)

Norma, a highly educated professional who has immigrated from Mexico also talked about the importance of physical appearance early in her career. As an exceptionally attractive young woman, Norma gained considerable advantages in her native country as a result of her looks. Given that her move to the United States did not occur until her middle years, she felt unable to comment on whether physical appearance

is as important in this environment as it was in Mexico. However, she believed that ability and passing the required exams, rather than looks, would be the major determinant of her future career success.

In the past was totally important for me because that part opened door... opened doors for me. Very frequently. Very, very frequently. (Norma, Latina, 54 years old)

As was the case with the marriage ideal, the themes of no longer being concerned about pleasing or about physical appearance came up in the accounts of women with different ethnic and social class backgrounds.

Education or Getting Degrees

Four participants mentioned education or getting degrees as goals that they no longer perceive as important. In two cases, life circumstances prevented the women from getting the education they had aspired to, but they were no longer concerned about that loss or willing to go back to school for the degree. Instead, an investment in their children took precedence in those participants' lives.

Kerry, a college graduate in her late forties who describes herself as a lifelong learner with a high need for intellectual stimulation, had really wished to pursue a graduate degree and tried doing so when her youngest of four children was five. However, that project proved unpractical and she traded her own academic ambitions for investing in her children's education and future.

I really wanted to pursue more education. I have a bachelor's degree, I wanted to get a graduate degree and study more. And I thought this was something I would do... umm... when my youngest child was about five, I started... I tried to go to graduate school. I lived 100 miles from the campus, and I commuted twice a week. I did it for one semester, and I couldn't do it. I just said, "You know, this is too much." I was leaving home at 4:30 in the morning, coming home at 7 PM, and

I still had a child who was five years old, and the oldest was ten. And I said, “You know, this... it’s not practical,” it wasn’t doable. And... and I was... I was really disappointed at the time, and now it’s like – it would be nice, I would like to do that, but right at the moment it’s not... it’s like I still need to pay all of their tuition. (laughing) You know, my... my need for more education, at this point in my life, it’s because it’s just something I want. My children’s college education has to do with their future and their economic survival, so I can’t really justify the expense right now for me. And so, it’s not... overall, it’s less important to me than it was. For those reasons. (Kerry, Caucasian, 49 years old)

Kimberly, who was already in her sixties and retired for more than a decade at the time of the interview, recounted her early hopes to continue her education and build a career. The pursuit of those goals was unexpectedly curtailed by the birth of her disabled son, as she could not afford to finish college while working hard to support him.

Well, school was important for both of us [her and her husband], we had big lofty goals and then that kind of, financially, you know, medically speaking, umm... you know, I had wanted to go into court reporting, I was... worked in the DA’s office and... so I had big, you know, ideas about a career at the time, even though I wanted to be a mother and my husband an engineer, but, you know, this kind of things change. And so really, my focus before that was because he was born when I was 24, even though that wasn’t really young, it was kind of a point where, you know, you just are working to survive and pay doctors’ bills. (Kimberly, Caucasian, 63 years old)

Other participants noted the diminished significance of academic degrees in the context of their current careers and lives, even when they might have been able to get them. For Sarah, an experienced nurse with a four-year college education, taking classes to expand her knowledge had become a goal in itself, and was much more important than the formality of getting an advanced degree.

It was two years ago that I started taking some graduate classes, and... umm... just for the stimulation of learning. [...] you know, thinking “Oh, you know, get an advanced degree and go in this field.” And now it’s like “It’s just OK to sit back and learn for the sake of learning and having knowledge, because it’s yours.” And I can remember taking one class, and I had two traditional college

students sitting on either side, and my study guides were so... I would coordinate the lecture notes, and I would go through the book, and I would find all their responses to the study guide in the book, and I would cross-reference them, and they thought I was ridiculous. And I said "This is mine to have. I want the knowledge. It isn't for doing well on the test, I wanna know it because I can, and it becomes mine when I know it. I just want to learn." And, you know, for them, you're at a stage where you just... you wanna get your degree, you're getting ready to go in the workforce and provide and things, and it's a wonderful season to go for the sake of learning. And not have that pressure to just get through so you can get a degree, get out and get a job. (Sarah, Caucasian, 51 years old)

In the case of Margarita, another professional in her early fifties, getting an advanced degree seemed no longer worth it in light of other goals that gained precedence in recent years. Although she had always excelled at academic tasks and continued to highly value her professional career, Margarita preferred spending the energy required for completing a Master's degree on activities that are better aligned with her current priorities, including spending time with family, writing books for children, and keeping healthy.

The trajectories outlined above reveal distinct paths leading to the abandonment of educational goals. Whereas Kerry and Kimberly were forced to give up their aspirations as a result of life circumstances that derailed their plans relatively early on, Sarah and Margarita willingly put aside the pursuit of getting degrees because of priority shifts that appeared closely related to their aging and the development of new perspectives on what truly matters. Whereas disengagement from the pursuit of narrow educational goals exemplified by the latter participants can be interpreted as a mark of freedom to focus on internally defined endeavors, it needs to be acknowledged that for several other women, getting a degree and embarking on a new career were central to how they saw themselves, as will be discussed in the context of women's projected

identities. What seemed to contribute to Margarita and Sarah's ability to disengage from earlier dreams of a graduate degree were their already satisfying professional careers, which set them apart from other participants who were not content with their existing jobs or careers.

Career

For several Caucasian women, paid work or getting ahead in their career had been much more important in the past than at the time of the interview. Unlike other past values such as the traditional marriage ideal or the concern with pleasing others, whose abandonment was often related to the wisdom derived from life experiences, the shift of focus from career to other projects appeared to be, in two of these cases, simply a consequence of retirement. Helen, whose diverse hobbies and passions now include paints and crafts, hiking and collecting artifacts, writing poetry and novels as well as many other activities, talked about having been defined by her military career before retiring from that work in her forties.

And it always HAD to in the military, because... you know, they could call you up any time, 24 hours a day and say "Come in now!" And, you know, you could go in for an eight hour shift and leave 30 hours later, so... yeah, that WAS who you were, they basically owned you. [...] I retired from the army in '95, so... I was 44 when I retired. (Helen, Caucasian, 60 years old)

Lynette, a former wedding chapel manager, remembered having been defined by career success earlier in her life.

Climbing the corporate ladder. Yeah, aha. Cause I had ran [sic] some other wedding chapels, and... and I said "I wanna go open one myself," you know. Well, I knew one was coming up, so I called the guy and... yeah, it took me nine months, but I finally got the job. (laughing) [...] At first I was just troubleshooting, and that isn't a lot of fun. Cleaning up somebody else's mess.

[...] Then that 24 hours turns into 48 hours. (laughing) But it was good, it was good. (Lynette, Caucasian, 63)

Unlike these participants who had previously identified with their careers, Kerry recounted a strong, yet unfulfilled desire to work outside the home when her children were very small. For this 49 year-old Caucasian woman with a working-class family background, the shifting expectations regarding women's social roles following the second wave of the women's movement meant an internalized pressure to pursue a career, even as she was taking care of four children and unable to find a job that would pay more than the cost of daycare.

When the children were very small, although I enjoyed it, it was very difficult. [...] I wasn't working, and I felt like I should be, when I was... my children were small. [...] And, you know, women of my age in this country were really programmed that we had to do that, so it was kind of hard. I wanted to be working, but I wasn't in a situation where it was really feasible. We used to live in a small town, where there weren't... I couldn't have made enough money to pay the babysitter, you know. And I wasn't really content with that role for a very long time. Although I enjoyed the children, I still wasn't... I felt like I should be doing something else, something more, something bigger, you know. So at this time in their lives, I'm much more... I'm happier in the role of the mother than I think I ever have been. Which is a lot, since they're grown. (laughing) (Kerry, Caucasian, 49)

To contextualize Kerry's uneasiness about temporarily functioning as a stay-at-home mother, it is worth noting that although the ideal of the White middle-class homemaker defined by her roles as wife and mother dominated the 1950s (Harris, 1975), women's exclusive identification with nuclear family roles came under scrutiny during the following decade as a monotonous and alienating existence. Consistent with that ideological shift, which is most famously expressed in Betty Friedan's popular book "The

Feminine Mystique,” first published in 1963, the number of employed women also increased dramatically in the next few decades (Andersen, 2006).

Perhaps as an expression of the changing attitudes and employment patterns of those decades, Kerry, who came of age in the early 80s, felt that proper womanhood could not be achieved without combining childrearing with other, presumably more meaningful work activities. However, her original belief in the necessity of paid work as a significant addition to family roles and identities disappeared over time. Nearing age fifty and having experienced the workforce as a college graduate, Kerry did not regard her job as anything more than a source of income necessary to pay the bills. Instead, she valued motherhood and other family relationships most and, despite her curiosity and learning inclinations, she had also for a long time given up her own educational aspirations to support her children’s future.

The expectations regarding women’s workforce participation during their childbearing years were also apparent in Stephanie’s recollections of her first marriage, when she was working long hours as a manicurist to supplement her husband’s already high income. In retrospect, that busy life of obsessing over money appeared far less desirable than her more peaceful, although relatively modest, present existence.

When I think back, like I said, on that period in my life – I just had this dull roar in my head that never went away, it was like constant. Like I never really relaxed, I was always on to the next thing, on to the next thing after that, two steps ahead. I never was like... Even when I went on vacation and stuff, I’d still be clicking away – OK, I gotta do this, I gotta do that, and I’m gonna make this much money on that day, and that much money on that day – I never just turned off.
(Stephanie, Caucasian, 51 years old)

Material Things

As suggested by the above quote, Stephanie's preoccupation with making large amounts of money has faded over the years, as the importance of material things in her life has diminished considerably. Her middle-age rebellious phase following her divorce led not only to a reexamination of her relationship expectations, but also to the realization that many of her previous possessions did not really matter. Despite her middle-class family background and a financially successful first marriage, Stephanie's drug addiction left her virtually homeless. Although she was somewhat concerned about the possibility of not being able to satisfy basic needs such as shelter or heat at some point in the future, she was also very clear about the minimalistic material conditions that enable her to feel content with her life.

I was always one of those that had, and then I became a drug addict and I had NOTHING. I had what would fit in my BMW, that's it. I came from a 3,500 square foot house to a little tiny car's worth of stuff. [...] And I think that's... I was never thankful for it. [...] I just assumed it was owed to me, that that's how life went. I worked hard, I had a beautiful home, I had a nice car, I had everything – the pasta maker, the... all the rest of the crap that you feel is so important to you. When you have nothing you realize all that crap means jack – NOTHING, you know, I mean you just get down to having nothing, you're surfing on somebody's sofa, you have nowhere to live, you know how to be homeless – you're not really homeless because, you know, you've got friends over here, you're staying on their couch and showering and stuff, and then you go to these friends, and... umm... so I wouldn't ever say I was homeless, but I was pretty down.

And I think that's why things are so important to me now – my little house, my grandson – I don't need anything else, I'm OK, if I just have a roof over my head and a little bit of food, I'm gonna be OK. [...] I'll be fine. [...] I have a grandson, I have a cat, I have a car... you know what, my life's pretty god damn good compared to some of these people. And I just really saw things in a different picture. I'm not at Fourth Street, I don't live in a tent. (Stephanie, Caucasian, 51 years old)

Emily, like Stephanie, had lost her job fairly recently and financial concerns precluded her pursuit of some activities that she truly loved or desired, such as traveling or babysitting future grandchildren on a full-time basis. Yet, she had also come to believe that a minimal level of financial security, rather than a lavish lifestyle, is sufficient for achieving contentment. Both Emily and Stephanie talked about living in peace as a goal that replaces previous preoccupations with making money and acquiring objects, and for both women internal peace was predicated upon the absence of factors such as a stressful job, thus underlying the notion that earning money is not the ultimate goal in life and that it is not worth sacrificing one's psychological balance for.

P: Material things – they're not as important to me anymore.

I: Why do you think that is?

P: Mm... because right now I have a goal of getting out of debt, and there's nothing more important to me than to getting out of debt. And one thing that I've never forgotten – umm... there was a young Cuban boy that was invited to lunch to my house, and he walked into my house and... and all by himself he started walking around, and all he would say is "too much, too much." And I didn't understand what... why he was saying "too much," and he sat down at the table and he told me "In Cuba we have a table and chairs, and maybe a couple of pieces of furniture, and that is all we need. And this is too much." And I just stared at him, I go "Oops," and I realize, "You know, he's right. We don't need too much. We need peace." And, you know, just... we don't... I don't need so much anymore, and... so now my goal is "Do I really need this?" And if I don't need it, I put it aside and I'm at the age that I want to be out of debt, and hopefully pay my house, and live in peace. (Emily, Latina, 55 years old)

Even though women's financial concerns will be explored later as considerations about the future in the context of aging, it is worth keeping in mind that for at least some of the participants, financial goals were fairly minimalistic and money or material possessions were no longer seen as contributors to happiness or fulfillment in life, as they had once been perceived.

In conclusion, unlike the discussion about currently valued identities, during which women described the roles and identities that defined them at the time of the interview, reflections on the past typically entailed recounting sets of values that had become irrelevant and no longer influenced their identities and life decisions. Importantly, the shift from trying to meet external expectations to using a more internal-based framework for evaluating one's relationships and activities (as it transpired from accounts of past values) can be used to contextualize and better understand women's present identities as well. For example, participants who talked fondly about an existing marriage very frequently assigned to it different, less constraining meanings than they would have in their youth. A similar shift can be noted with regard to other areas of life such as religion, whose meanings to women often became more personalized over the years. Thus, even when there appears to be continuity in terms of the types of relationships and institutions with which women identify, their significance may, in fact, change considerably over the life course.

Projected Identities

After talking about their major identities and recounting those identities and values that they have abandoned, the participants were also asked what they thought would matter to them most in the future. As expected, many of the women who valued various family relationships indicated that those would remain important to them. Similarly, career was brought up by those participants who were either highly invested in their jobs or studying to embark on new career paths.

Notably, giving to others, whether in the form of volunteering or helping family members, featured most prominently in women's responses as an activity (and sometimes identity) expected to gain significance as they get older. Although volunteering already played a central role in several women's lives, there was a shared expectation that it would become even more important in the future, especially as demands on their time would lessen as a result of retirement. In addition, caring for or helping out family members was also frequently mentioned as a desire for the future, especially by the Latina participants.

Family

About half of the participants mentioned family or specific family relationships as identities that would continue to be significant to them. Jennifer, whose close family connections included two adult children that lived with her, an adult step-daughter, a sister who lived in town, and an "incredibly supportive husband" who was recovering from an injury that left him partially disabled, did not expect the importance of her family to subside in the future.

I: When you think about the future, what do you think will matter to you most?
P: Probably still family, definitely. (Jennifer, Caucasian, 43 years old)

Kerry, another Caucasian woman in her late forties who had been married to an Arab man for several decades and had not "felt White in a very long time," was grateful for having adopted her husband's Middle Eastern cultural values surrounding connectedness within the family. She described her relationships with her four children and her own mother as very close and friendship-like, and also believed that she felt closer to her five brothers than they felt towards her because of those assumed values.

Her response regarding the future closely resembled Jennifer's: "Still my family, I don't see a big difference, you know." Similarly, Susan, a 56 year-old White woman who came from a "very close-knit family" and saw herself as "the heart" of her family, which included two step-sons, a daughter, her husband, and her 95 year-old father whom she helped out frequently, stated "I think my family will continue to matter to me always."

Although children were often among the family connections that White women expected would remain important to them, children and grandchildren were particularly central in the future plans of some Latina participants. For Emily, a very religious woman who had lost one of her three sons, dreams for the future included not only caring for her soon-to-be-born grandchildren, but also making sure that her sons become ready for the "arrival" of Jesus, as she herself was striving to be.

I wanna be ready [for Jesus' arrival]. Cause I know he's coming, umm... and I just need to be ready, because I need to go to heaven. I wanna be... I wanna be with Him eternally, and that's the most important thing for me. I want to be with my Father. But [...] I just say "Lord, I don't wanna go by myself, I was not able to bring my sons to you, you figure out a way how to get him ready to..." So that's important, for them to be ready. (Emily, Latina, 55 years old)

Teresa, a Latina immigrant in her mid-sixties, was highly invested in supporting her high school- and college-age grandchildren to achieve their career potential, and being alive to see them succeed was of utmost importance to her.

In the future, I wanna see my childrens to making... finish college, to do a career, you know, I have one – she wanna be a doctor, and another grandson wanna be a doctor, and one she wanna be a... what you say, office of probation. It scared me a little bit because that's involve a lot of problems, a lot of things, but it's her decision, I respect that.

I wish God give me time to see that, to see my granddaughter be a doctor, you know what I mean? More years, it's a few more years, but I'm so happy because she's so happy doing the... learning, you know, go to college and all that. And I'm proud of my grandbabies, they try to do the best. I know they teenagers, they

have problems, but that's why we need to help them. (Teresa, Latina, 64 years old)

The anticipation of close, meaningful family relationships in one's future appeared to inspire mostly positive feelings of connectedness, and some of these relationships constituted buffers against a variety of age-related concerns. However, as will be shown later, tight family connections can also be a source of anxiety when one's own or other family members' health is considered in the context of aging.

Career

Career plans and aspirations were also central among the projected identities of several participants. However, women's expectations about the likelihood of their professional dreams coming true ranged from complete confidence in one's abilities and experiences to fear of failure due to age discrimination. The accounts of Linda and Jennifer, two Caucasian undergraduate students in their forties illustrate these diverging views. Although both women valued their experiences and thought they enhanced their work potential, changing carriers in middle-age was described as empowering by Linda and as "a little scary" by Jennifer, who acknowledged others' likely perceptions of her as being already close to retirement and therefore not worth hiring.

In the future... well, I'll be 45 on my birthday, so I'm a little bit older than a lot of my friends, and of course a lot of the students in the undergrad programs here at UNR, with whom I identify most with right now. I think my future... I'm only just now getting to middle-age, if I'm gonna live to 100, you know, 80, you know, 40-45, that's middle-age. And I think there's so much more that I can do, and I take all that experience from my past and I put it now into this new education, this new experience I'm gaining, and I think there's nothing that can stop me. (Linda, Caucasian, 44 years old)

I think as I move from school to work, [...] student will kind of go away and work will go up, kind of take the place of that.

It [experience] helps my job, the more life experience I have the better I am at, cause we do divorce, so I help people through divorces. So the more life experience I have the more I can relate to them, so that's a good thing. But in probably also my future career, it'll be... it will help with that, I think. Although, changing careers in your 40s is a little scary. And it's like "Hmm... am I going to get hired?" I'm going to be competing against people in their 20s and 30s for the same job, it's like "Hmm..."

It's not so much how I feel, as how I think everybody else feels. [...] I think there is a prejudice in the job market, cause, you know, they don't wanna hire you and then have you retire, or put a lot of time into you and have you leave, or... (Jennifer, Caucasian, 43 years old)

Echoing Jennifer's concerns, Toni, who despite her advanced degree had not gained professional respect within the community by her late fifties, felt hopeless about ever gaining that respect as she gets older.

Well, I think [my field] for a long time, yeah it is gonna be important to me. And I guess because [my field] is so important to me and I would like to see this community's respect, it concerns me that I'm losing hope that I'll ever get that respect because I feel like, you know... And I... I think that in general, as a woman gets older, it's harder for her to get respect, and so I feel like I don't have respect now and I'm getting older, so it's gonna get harder to gain community respect... (Toni, Caucasian, 58 years old)

On the other hand, some women who already had satisfying careers talked about the importance of keeping and possibly adding to or upgrading their current work activities. Two participants who thought about themselves as atypical Latinas in terms of their educational achievements and preferences were very explicit about the significance of jobs in their visions of the future. For Margarita, a professional whose dream was to "one day" write books for children, working at her job was a personal necessity, as she could not imagine herself staying at home.

I got into working here because I don't see my life without working, it's hard for me to think to be only at home. Because I told them if I come back to Guatemala, I would like to work maybe part-time or few, really few hours in order to be busy,

because my life to being in the house is no... Because this is another characteristic I think, I am no a common Hispanic, because more of the Hispanic girls they know to cook, they know all of these things I am no good on that. (Margarita, Latina, 51 years old)

Another Latina woman's dream was to obtain her medical license in this country and to combine part-time working as a doctor with other important roles, such as grandmother.

My perfect dream is working as a doctor in a little clinic as... for six hours, and then go to the care of my grandchildren, and then go to my house to dream, and that's my... my dream. If I cannot get the medical license, because could be... could be, I don't think so, but could be, I'm thinking [...] keep working here, and keep helping my daughter. (Norma, Latina, 54 years old)

As can be inferred from the above examples, the prospects of a new or continuing career can sustain women's enthusiasm for the future or, conversely, provoke fear of discrimination and loss of respect. Somewhat surprisingly, a strong investment in one's future career was as prevalent among Latinas as it was among White women, and older participants, with the exception of retirees, were not less likely than younger interviewees to value their profession. Instead, what seemed to be common among women who brought up career in relation to their future was the high status of their existing or desired jobs, or the high level of education that they had completed or were pursuing.

Among the participants without a college degree such as Stephanie, a White woman in her early fifties, or Emily, a Latina in her mid-fifties, who had both been laid off and wished to find paid work again in the future, the meanings associated with their previous or desired jobs did not seem deep enough to be regarded as important identities. Although these women mentioned a variety of reasons (e.g., financial, social) for seeking

employment, their views of themselves appeared largely unaffected by their job situation. It is also worth noting that for a considerable portion of the interviewed women, future occupations did not carry profound meanings regardless of their educational level. Kerry, a 49 year-old data management analyst with a college degree was explicit about things like money or a job not being important to her in the future, other than as a means to pay her bills.

Giving to Others

Half of the participants talked about giving to others as something that they anticipate or desire for their future. This finding is hardly surprising, given that many were already engaged in such activities, and considering the well-documented emotional, social, and health benefits of volunteering in older women's lives (McIntosh & Danigelis, 1995; Onyx & Warburton, 2003). Indeed, volunteering has been previously found to contribute to older (65 to 80 years old) women's identities and to give their lives meaning (Warburton & McLaughlin, 2006). Interestingly however, the nature of the projected giving activities varied based on participants' ethnicity. In general, White women expressed a desire to contribute to the larger community, whereas most Latina participants who invoked giving to others planned to help family members, often in the form of providing care to (potential) grandchildren. This focus is consistent with the expectation that Hispanic women are more likely to be highly invested in their familial and mothering roles, as suggested by previous studies (Hurtado, 2003).

The motivations for giving to others in a non-familial context also varied considerably. Jennifer, a jovial and energetic college student in her early forties, described volunteering as a fun activity, to be resumed after her very busy schedule,

which includes going to school and holding two jobs, becomes less hectic. In her case, projecting the desire to volunteer into the future appeared to be primarily related to anticipated changes in her work situation, rather than to internal transformations associated with aging.

I'd like to do some volunteering again, kind of give back to the community, I really like that. I did a lot of fundraising for different groups and that was really fun. So, throwing events and setting up silent auctions and all of that, I miss it. So I would like to do that in the future. (Jennifer, Caucasian, 43 years old)

For Debbie, another college student in her forties who commonly indulges in self-reflective thoughts, middle-age represented a time to start giving back to others. Even though her previous lucrative career eventually led to boredom, she felt very fortunate to have gotten a lot out of life and planned to help others in return. Thus, giving to others had become a defining component of Debbie's existence, and her choice of the nursing profession as her second career reflected the shift in her focus from self and immediate family members to people in general.

I think I... umm... it's going to matter to me increasingly how much I can give to other people, more than benefits to myself. I feel like I'm really lucky. I feel like I have got so much out of life, that... I don't know, maybe I can get more, but I think I have... I'm in a good position to give to help people. (Debbie, Caucasian, 46 years old)

On the other hand, Peggy, a never married professional in her late fifties, planned to engage in volunteer work as a means of coping with retirement. While she described giving to others as an avenue to keep busy when her current job no longer fills much of her day, the centrality of work to Peggy's current identity may call for volunteering to also replace her paid job as a significant identity.

I think it's going to be an interesting adjustment, when going to the job is not part of the day. So that will be... that will be an interesting adjustment. [...] I figure I'll probably do some kind of volunteer work just to stay busy, so... (Peggy, Caucasian, 59 years old)

For the oldest participant in the sample, Anne, who was already retired, continuing to help others was the defining component of her projected identity. She and her partner of many years, Lori, had no children of their own, and taking care of others was an opportunity to play various caregiving roles that might have been unavailable to them otherwise.

I: And when you think about the future, what do you think will matter to you most?

P: Hmm... that I did my best as far as helping others, you know, I... I'm a big give back, you know, I may not be able to do it financially, but you want my time, you got it. You know, if I can give you a... a bag of food, you got it. If I can babysit your kid, you got it. [...] To continue in that vein as best I can, yeah. (Anne, Caucasian, 65 years old)

Giving to the community was also central in the future plans of Elizabeth, a highly devout Christian born in Los Angeles to parents of Mexican origin. Elizabeth had volunteered for various causes throughout her life, and her current charitable work was an integral component of the faith mission that had been defining her entire existence for a long time.

I think that I am so... umm... excited, and committed, and clear about what's important to me right now about my faith, my faith journey, my... umm... charitable works, and a potential partner who can share that... I don't see that changing. I'm... I don't see that changing in ten years. (Elizabeth, Latina, 60 years old)

Unlike Elizabeth, most Latina participants invoked helping their families as a personal goal for the future. Four of these women specifically wished to offer assistance

with raising (future) grandchildren, as illustrated in the examples below. Emily, the first of the participants quoted here, was “very, very excited” about becoming a grandmother soon.

Yes, I am. Yes, I am [looking forward to this stage of life]. And especially now that I’m gonna have grandchildren. I wish I could afford to stay home and just take care of them. But right now I don’t think I will be able to do that, but that... that would be my awesome dream. Just take care of my babies. (Emily, Latina, 55 years old)

And I’m proud of my... my grandbabies, they try to do the best. I know they... they teenagers, they have problems, but that’s why we need to help them. [...] They’re going to say “Well, I know my grandma, my mother care about me.” Because when they have family in the future, they’re going to learn all the problems, [...] but that’s why we need to show them how take care of these problems. [...] And that’s why I wanna be together with my childrens. With my daughters and my grandbabies, I wanna be involved more than, you know... (Teresa, Latina, 64 years old)

I know a grandma is no that good that the mom, but I think a grandma with education and caring is very better or most better than the daycare. [...] Then I’m thinking seriously, if my daughter become the doctor that she wants, or she needs me because she has to work a lot because currently this is the life, (laughing) currently women have to work, I would like to be an assistant for raising my grandchildren. (Norma, Latina, 54 years old)

Although Emily and Norma were also highly invested in their marriage or finding a partner, respectively, their actual or potential relationships with men did not threaten their calling as grandmothers. In contrast, one Latina woman’s desire to care for future grandchildren was dependent upon the evolution of her romantic life. A well-educated and articulate professional in her mid-fifties, Sandra felt ready, as long as she remained single, to invest all her life savings to start a daycare and take care of her own grandchildren as well if her daughter needed her help. However, finding a partner would become her priority and render her unavailable to “sacrifice” her life babysitting.

Whereas for the above participants, plans of giving back to their families tended to revolve around grandchildren, Margarita described helping her extended family as very important to her, both now and in the future. Although her current contributions were mainly material things, her plans for retirement included potentially going back to her native country to connect with and help her large family. Importantly, Margarita also perceived the extended family as a safety net and a resource to be relied upon in old age. Thus, present and future giving activities in a familial context can also be conceptualized as a safeguard against the threats of old age, by fostering a sense of connectedness and security among family members.

Maybe when I retire I would like to come back to Guatemala to help my family. That's... giving back things... you know, every year I... I don't know, I know when the people need things, if somebody help you, you will remember this people, but I don't like that only for remembering, no, I want to give away something, that's why every time I buy things and I collect things and I send boxes to Guatemala, and you can see the happy faces when they open the box and find things that are for everybody. I feel happy for that and I can... I can help that way. (Margarita, Latina, 51 years old)

Regardless of the type of anticipated helping activities or the motivations for wanting to engage in them, giving to others appeared to represent a source of meaningful social involvement and satisfaction that women desire for their future. The availability of opportunities to volunteer or care for others in middle-age and beyond may then contribute to more positive feelings about aging among women, as will be discussed in the following chapter on aging experiences.

In conclusion, participants' projections about the future seemed closely related with, and almost an extension of, their present identities. Thus, large numbers of women valued various family relationships and giving to others in different forms, and expected

those areas of life to remain just as important, if not more so, as they get older. Moreover, even though some women no longer identified with work endeavors, there were other participants (especially among the highly educated respondents) whose career was not only significant as a current source of satisfaction and meaning, but also the focus of their future ambitions.

The identities invoked by the participants as valued in the context of the present as well as the future are largely consistent with the types of relationships, activities, and institutions described in the literature as central to women's lives. More specifically, motherhood, marriage and other couple relationships, extended family relationships, friendships, religion, and career have all been recognized as potentially significant for many women. Confirming previous observations regarding ethnic patterns in women's important identities, the Latina respondents appeared to be more highly invested in religion and certain family connections (especially with grandchildren) compared to the White participants. There was also a tendency for the highly educated women in the sample to value their profession more than the less educated participants. Overall, however, ethnic and social class differences have only emerged in a limited number of areas, and therefore their impact on aging experiences may not be as noticeable as initially expected.

Chapter 6: Feelings about Aging

The second half of the interviews was focused on understanding participants' aging experiences, as well as exploring the possible connections between those experiences and women's valued identities. In addition to being asked how they felt about their own aging in general, the interviewees were also prompted to discuss any changes that they had noticed in their bodies and physical appearance, and to indicate how they felt about those changes. Given the emphasis on physical losses in the literature on women's aging (e.g., Hurd Clarke, 2011; Melamed, 1983; Stewart, 2013, etc), the purpose of asking the participants specifically about physical transformations was to make sure that this topic was addressed during our discussion. Further, the participants were encouraged to offer their insights regarding the possible connections between their important identities and aging experiences. More specifically, the women were asked whether they thought that their feelings about aging (including their feelings about physical changes) were influenced in any way by those identities that they had mentioned as significant. The insights offered by the participants, as well as the researcher's own observations are relied upon throughout this chapter, which consists of a presentation of women's feelings about aging in the context of (and sometimes as a function of) their valued identities.

Participants' aging experiences were almost always multifaceted and contradictory, thus precluding simplistic classifications of personal accounts as either positive or negative. While there were a few instances in which women viewed aging either very favorably or almost entirely negatively, in most instances they mentioned a mixture of desirable and undesirable outcomes. Moreover, even though women's

complaints about getting older were often substantial, the gains that they identified as results of aging were also significant and tended to either counterbalance or surpass in importance the unwanted effects. Replicating previous findings from interviews with older women (Hurd Clarke, 2001), the participants often felt a tension between their aging body or appearance and their inner self. In other words, the women experienced a continuity of their personhood that did not seem to be matched by the obvious changes occurring on the outside.

Like important identities, aging experiences have been grouped according to the major themes that emerged from women's responses. This chapter opens with a couple of themes that reflect predominantly negative feelings, namely bewilderment and concerns about aging. Among the concerns frequently brought up by the participants were health, physical appearance, discrimination, and finances. Following a detailed discussion of these concerns is a presentation of the considerable psychological and other gains that women also attributed to the aging process.

Bewilderment

When asked how they felt about their own aging, several participants indicated that they were startled by their current age. In some cases, women perceived their age category as a potential obstacle to achieving specific goals such as getting a job; in others, the sheer number that communicated their age seemed to evoke threatening thoughts. Although, as will be shown later, a discourse on losses did not generally dominate women's accounts of their aging experiences, there was nevertheless an

element of surprise and even shock in acknowledging that in society's eyes, one had entered or was about to join a different, and less valued, class of individuals.

According to Calasanti and Slevin (2006), age-based prejudice is unique in that members of the oppressed group are not born, but rather gradually transition into that category. Thus, unlike other forms of oppression such as gender, race, or ethnicity, where individuals often face prejudice throughout their lifetimes and are therefore more likely to develop mechanisms for coping with it, people may be less prepared to deal with ageism when they start losing the privileges of youth. Considering this particularity, it does not seem contradictory that some women expressed bewilderment at the realization of their new (and socially inferior) age group membership, even as they also recognized the significant gains brought about by the aging process. Jennifer, a married college student with ambitious educational and career plans, is an evocative illustration of this ambivalent consternation. On the one hand, given that she was still adjusting to her lesser status associated with no longer being "the youngest person in the room," her initial depiction of aging revealed astonishment and hopelessness.

A: When you think about your own aging, how do you feel about it?

P: (Pause) Bewildered. It's... suddenly you're not the youngest person in the room anymore, you're like "How did this happen?! How come everybody's younger than me? I used to be the youngest person in the room." So it's... and it's kind of a... it sneaks up on you. It's like... I don't know, you fill out a survey, and now you're like... in a lower age group, you're like "Oh, hmm..." [...] It's... kind of startling at times. It's like "Wow, am I really 43?! I can't be 43, I have lots of things left to do, I don't wanna be 43..." (Jennifer, Caucasian, 43 years old)

Yet, on the other hand, after elaborating upon her feelings, it became clear that Jennifer's main concern with aging was the prejudicial reaction of other people in the

context of her graduate school and job aspirations. Whereas her bafflement was a reflection of her fears regarding others' perceptions, it did not fully capture the complexity of her age-related experiences, which also included a reported boost in wisdom and confidence. Moreover, Jennifer's uneasiness about aging did not extend to the private realm of her family and friends, where she did not expect any significant changes as a result of her getting older.

Peggy, a never-married professional in her late fifties, was similarly having a hard time digesting the labels assigned to her age and their social implications. Although she did not think that aging was "such a big deal" for her emotionally, her concerns about others' perceptions, especially on the job market, mirrored Jennifer's. While still happily working in her long-term career, Peggy worried that a job loss at her age would render her virtually unemployable. Compounding that potential loss, a prior health checkup where she had been warned about the impending demise of her body in a tactless and authoritarian manner left her feeling like "an accident waiting to happen."

Understandably, Peggy really struggled with "getting beyond the label" that signified her joining the denigrated social category of "older" people or "senior citizens," and resisted being included in such a group prematurely.

P: I have mixed feelings. (laughing) Umm... I don't... you know, inside I can't believe my age, you know, I just don't think of myself as my age, so... umm...

I: And in what ways does it bother you?

P: Well, you know, just the number, umm... and to hear people, you know, people sort of refer to that age bracket as... as being... umm... older or, you know, in some cases in that age bracket now people are referred to as senior citizens. (laughing) What? That can't be me, you know. (laughing) Not yet, you know. (laughing) So that just seems really strange. [...] Cause I think I'm willing to concede, maybe if you're 70 you're beyond middle-aged. (laughing)

I: But not at 59.

P: No, yeah. No, 59... 59 is middle-age. I just don't quite think it's a senior citizen yet, you know. (laughing) (Peggy, Caucasian, 59 years old)

Kimberly was also troubled by the “old number” denoting her imminent age.

While her concern with that number had to do mainly with the reality of the human life-span and approaching death, she also bemoaned the “very, very negative” connotations of aging in what she described as a youth-centered society. Although, at sixty-three, she had not fully experienced the ravaging effects of age discrimination, she was expecting to face much more prejudice as she continues to age.

P: I think the only thing that bothers us [her and her husband] about aging is the number.

I: In what sense?

P: Well, I think 70 is kind of like the big one, the seventy. Sixty, and 65, and... but 70... I think when you analyze that number and put the life span, I think they figure is 80-85 or something, given male-female, and you look at these past fifteen years – zap, gone, just boom! Your... your head spins, it goes so fast. And the old saying that we've all heard all of our lives, the older you get, the faster it goes, those are the things if you set down and dwelled upon them would just freak... freaks you out.

I'm not referring to 60 year olds, but as you grow older, I think there's a lack of respect and a lack of everything for aging people. [...] So I don't think there's any benefit to aging, because I think that you lose... umm... respect, and you lose... umm... validity, and that's what I think about aging. (Kimberly, Caucasian, 63 years old)

Consistent with the observation that aging involves shifting from a favored group membership to one that is characterized mainly by disadvantages (Calasanti and Slevin, 2006), the above examples reveal the pain of acquiring a devalued social status.

However, the shock of aging was not always related to being judged by others. While Lynette's disbelief at having converted from the youngest to the oldest person in her previous work environments echoed Jennifer's, her primary complaint was the abrupt

transition into retirement, which led to the loss of the routine and gratification that she had derived from her career. Lynette confessed to trying hard every day to accepting her new situation and stay positive, and it appeared that her family, friends, and church community were able to compensate, at least to some extent, for her disengagement from that satisfying work world.

I: When you think about your own aging, how do you feel about it?

P: (Pause) In the beginning, and... and up to this point, it just seemed like all of a sudden it – boom, I was here, you know, and so now every day it's just accepting it, you know. When you first get on that social security and you – boy, all of a sudden... I used to be the youngest person wherever I worked, I mean, all of a sudden, I'm the oldest, you know. [...] It was a little bit more of a change than I had thought, (laughing) you know. (Lynette, Caucasian, 63 years old)

To elaborate upon the negative connotations that led some women to feel dismayed at the realization of their aging, the following is a more comprehensive presentation of the concerns expressed by participants with regard to growing older.

Concerns about Aging

Health

An overwhelming majority of the women in this sample brought up physical and sometimes mental health as issues that concerned them in relation to aging. For a third of the participants, health represented one of their major worries about the future and a potential threat to their most valued identities. Many others talked about health problems as less dramatic, but nonetheless serious matters shaping their feelings about aging or perceptions of their bodies.

In some cases, the preoccupation with health stemmed from women's high investment in family relationships, as illustrated by the words of a married Latina immigrant, mother of four, who also had ten siblings. Olivia defined herself largely through her role as a mother, and described her family's health as a top priority.

Well, when I'm thinking about the future, what matter most is my kids. The healthy of them, my healthy. My husband healthy. Ah... my family, my brothers and sisters, and how they gonna be when they're old. That's it. (Olivia, Latina, 48 years old)

Kimberly, a White mother in her sixties, hoped that she would remain in good health for a long time to continue helping her disabled son. The possibility of sickness and even death at her age, as evidenced by the fate of many of her friends, exacerbated Kimberly's anxiety about her son's future.

I'm 63 and my husband's 67, [...] and staying healthy is... I think everybody says that, but you know, doing it and meaning it are two different things, because as you age and you age with all of your friends, and you see them becoming sick and passing on, I think that is when you... umm... think about health more, and... and worry about it, you know. [...] I guess that would be my goal now, is to stay healthy for my son's sake. You know, because I don't wanna leave him, you know, that's just to me the worst. I do pray that he would pass before us... As bad as that sounds, I... it would be terrible, you know, for him to be left without us. (Kimberly, Caucasian, 63 years old)

Not becoming a burden to others, particularly to family members, as a result of illness in old age was also mentioned as a central future mission by several Caucasian women of different ages. Lynette, who was highly invested in her roles as a mother and grandmother and made considerable efforts to keep in touch with the younger generations, could not conceive of becoming a burden to them.

My health, just being able to retire and not be ill, you know. Umm... permanent ill, you know what I'm saying, not just a cold or an ache or a pain here, but [...]

God forbid, I just don't want a... I wanna be hooked up to no machines, and a burden to the kids, and... you know. No. Don't wanna do that. No. (Lynette, Caucasian, 63 years old)

Kerry, the participant who was married to an Arab man and cared deeply about her family members was equally concerned about not becoming a burden to her children, despite her eagerness to take care of her own mother if she were to need it.

Nobody wants to be a burden to their children, no one wants to be, you know, in a case of having to be taken care of so much, you know. Now, from the perspective of a daughter, I don't care if I have to take care of my mother, certainly it is not a problem. From being the parent, I don't wanna be in that position. [...] I don't want to... to put that on them, you know. (Kerry, Caucasian, 49 years old)

On the other hand, witnessing the struggles associated with debilitating illness and caretaking in old age that were taking place within her family inspired Amy's aversion of such a predicament and her determination to avoid becoming dependent at all costs.

Mainly I don't wanna ever be a burden, that's probably the biggest thing. Like seriously, if I got a terminal illness I would probably wait until it got to be too much and then end it, cause I don't want... like my mom's taking care of my grandma right now, and my grandma's 87, umm... and I see her struggle with it, and I get the feeling the only reason she stays alive is because of my mother. [...] Now if I was healthy and 87, and didn't have to carry around an oxygen tank like she [my grandmother] does and all that, maybe I would wanna be alive. (Amy, Caucasian, 40 years old)

Even outside of a family context, participants sometimes expressed concern about their health starting to deteriorate, and believed that their health status would gain much more significance in the future. Debbie, who had a general predisposition to reflect upon her own existence and the life cycle, noted that health was becoming increasingly important in her thoughts. She explained that she already had to pay more attention to

occurrences such as a sore knee, which were previously discarded as very minor inconveniences.

I think a lot about my health, and [...] I want to stay as healthy as I can for as long as I can. So... and I never thought about that, I've always been very healthy, I've never had any health problems at all, really, compared to anybody, just very minor things. [...] So... (laughing) I just think about my body more, I mean, just the basic function of my body. More than I used to. (Debbie, Caucasian, 46 years old)

Even more seriously, thoughts about old age led 56 year-old Susan to consider the possibility of extreme physical and mental impairments that can threaten everyday functioning. She expected not only the maintenance of her health, but also the management of her very existence to gradually become a priority in her life. The salience of Susan's concerns was likely exacerbated by having a ninety-five year-old father who had recently become dependent.

I suspect that as I get older, I will become more concerned about some issues that are only lightly touching me now – for example, access to health care, umm... not so much the ability to pay for it, but just finding a doctor or a system that is available; the effects of medications, cause as you get older you take more medications, it's inevitable; maintaining physical health, not appearance, but being strong of and fit of body, so that as I get older, I'm not likely to fall and break a hip or one of those things. [...] And I suspect that as I get into much later life and as my world narrows, I will revert to finding other things that right now have assumed a back burner will move to the fore once again, you know, how do I... how do I get to some place when I'm no longer able to drive? How do I manage a checkbook or finances when things have become more challenging and confusing, just because of the nature of... of the world changing? (Susan, Caucasian, 56 years old)

Like Susan and several other participants, Sarah also witnessed the effects of physical and mental decline in others, including family members, and acknowledged her fear of eventually falling prey to such conditions.

I'm looking at older people and thinking they're in walkers, they're in wheelchairs, their vision changes, umm... that will come. And you know it, and there... and there's fear. There's senile dementia, and Alzheimer's, and... umm... I have senile dementia in my family, and that's a fear, you know – is that something that I will face? (Sarah, Caucasian, 51 years old)

Teresa, a Latina woman in her mid-sixties was already suffering from ailments such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol, and all of her significant relationships and life pursuits were informed by, as well as served to diminish, her health concerns. She maintained her job primarily to keep her health insurance; her friendships were characterized by helping others, often in medical situations, and expecting the same in return if she were to need it; and her high investment in the grandmother role was dominated by the hope of surviving long enough to see her grandchildren succeed. Despite all these anxieties, Teresa was also grateful for all the complications and diseases that she did not have, and reiterated her thankfulness to God at various times during our discussion. Most importantly, she appreciated her continued physical independence, and stressed her belief that being able to take care of oneself equals being one's "own person." Like some of the women quoted earlier, Teresa was afraid of becoming a burden to her family.

I'm afraid to be in bed, you know, sick, giving a hard time to my family, because they have their own families, you know, and how they're going to take care of me? I... you know, that's why, I mean, I am a person... if I able to do everything by myself, fine. Because that's my wish. I wanna be my own person, you know what I'm... Do my own things [...] not dependent to nobody. (Teresa, Latina, 64 years old).

Death featured as a possibility among other participants' anxieties as well, and it was often a husband's passing that seemed particularly threatening. As mentioned in a

previous chapter, Emily and Margarita, two Latinas in their fifties who had close relationships with their husbands, could not imagine living without them. Yet, acknowledging that her husband's death would practically leave her alone in this country, Margarita was considering the option of moving back to Latin America at some point in the future. Given her close familial bonds ("I think it's because I am Hispanic and we have closeness with the family"), she felt confident that her children or nieces would take good care of her if she were to become dependent or during her final moments.

Kimberly was similarly afraid of being left without her husband, although she also did not want to leave behind her disabled son. For her, contemplating the consequences of such losses was at the core of her aging experience.

My thing with aging is the loss, I guess, you, know, the loss of not... I look forward to passing because I know it's such a wonderful place, but I don't want to be... I don't want my son to be left behind, [...] and I don't want to be left behind without my husband, those are the things I think about aging. (Kimberly, Caucasian, 63 years old)

Not all participants who mentioned age-related health concerns focused on death or other major losses, however. In many cases, women responded to inquiries about physical changes that they noticed in their bodies by invoking the onset of conditions such as arthritis and other joint problems, little aches and pains, high blood pressure, vision impairments, weight gain, or by noting a decrease in their energy level or strength. Although such changes can hardly be considered positive or desirable, they often did not carry profound meanings in terms of how women saw themselves in the context of aging. Furthermore, some participants acknowledged serious threats to their health, but were not as intensely preoccupied by them as Kimberly or Teresa.

Toni, a 58 year-old White participant, for example, did not have a satisfying relationship with her husband, and neither did she have close friendships or a successful career corresponding to her high level of education. Although she was wondering what would happen when she gets older considering she did not have “anybody that’s assigned the task of taking care of” her, she did not “think about care provision issues so much.” Instead, Toni found some positive role models in several very high functioning elderly women that she knew, and hoped that she would also be able to function for a long time.

Anne, another White woman in her mid-sixties who had suffered from a chronic illness since her youth, was also very much aware of the health effects of aging, especially in the aftermath of two falling accidents that accelerated the damage to her body. While she recognized that her condition limited her ability to engage in some valued activities with friends and acquaintances, as well as prevented her from standing for extended periods of time during her volunteering, “the physical part” did not bother her “most of the time.” As will be discussed later, Anne was one of several participants who thought of aging as primarily “a state of mind,” and therefore believed that being positive served to counteract most of the barriers imposed by physical limitations.

In addition to the types of conditions referred to so far, several women also brought up menopause as a major influence on their physical and mental health. Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Jones, 1994), the meanings of this process and its connotations in the context of aging varied greatly. Thus, participants’ evaluations of menopause ranged from highly positive to extremely negative, and whereas some viewed it as a symbolic marker of aging, others attached no meanings to it beyond the physical changes that they were experiencing.

The most favorable account was given by Linda, a forty-four year-old student who went through an early menopause at age thirty-five and had all her “parts taken out” a year later. Linda was really glad to have gotten rid of debilitating period cramps and mood swings, and felt that she could better interact with her “crazy hormonal” daughter in this “calm and cool” state. She also welcomed her transition from a “tomboy” to a more feminine person, which she attributed to the hormone patch. Overall, Linda categorized her untimely menopause as a very positive experience, with the only downside being a lack of role models among women in her age group, who were too young to have gone through this process. Debbie, another college student in her forties, had also entered menopause early as a result of a medical procedure following “terrible problems” with her menstrual cycles. She described her situation as “fabulous” and was “really happy” not to be suffering from menopause, like some of her friends.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Stephanie decried the numerous difficulties associated with her menopause journey. Although she was not concerned about possible connotations of menopause such as a lessening of her femininity, she reverted on several occasions to emphasizing her overwhelming feelings of incurable dryness, which were accompanied on a mental level by fogginess and difficulty concentrating.

I don't care about “Oh my god, I'm not a woman, I don't have my period,” I'm like happy about that, I can give a crap, but at the same time, if you have all these other things that go with that, you know, you're just... thirsty and you can't put enough lotion on, everything is just dried up, just... you just... and you feel that in your bones sometimes, like you feel creaky and I never used to feel that way... hmm... That's been my thing with aging is that the hot flashes are hell. And the drying up. Just everything I knew dries up. [...] I just feel like I'm drying up and I'm getting... I feel like I'm getting little-er, shrinking. (Stephanie, Caucasian, 51 years old)

Comparable experiences and views were recounted by Susan, who was in her mid-fifties and had already gone through menopause. Although she described menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes as challenging, they had no deeper meanings for her. As someone who was securely grounded in her family and community, Susan insisted that her use of hormone replacement therapy was simply a means of getting rid of bothersome symptoms, in the same way that one might want to remove an uncomfortable splinter.

Menopause was challenging, not because it represented anything other than discomfort. So, I didn't resent having menopausal symptoms, I did not have any of this "I'm no longer able to bear children" dynamic. What I did have was "Oh my God, I'm flashing. I hate flashing!" [...] I continue to take hormones because I don't care for the physical symptoms, I don't like having hot flash, it's miserable, nobody likes having hot flash. (Susan, Caucasian, 56 years old)

Unlike Stephanie and Susan, some women framed menopause as primarily a marker of aging. For fifty-one year-old Margarita, less frequent periods signified "the big change, the first change that really let me know that my body is changing and my age is changing also." Although she did not "feel" that she was "getting old," the evidence presented by menopause determined her to take better care of her health and physical appearance. At the same time, she also felt relief as a result of having "no more suffering every month with the period." Sarah similarly emphasized the symbolic importance of this transition, but also noted the growing acceptance that accompanies its losses. Interestingly, the notable changes that menopause represented for these two women did not appear to threaten their valued identities as wives, professionals, and so on.

There is, I think, like when you start to hit perimenopausal time and your periods become irregular, it dawns on you "This is a season gone." It's your childbearing season, which is very dear to women. [...] And on the other hand, it's like OK,

it's another season, we move on. There's not a worry of children, you know, getting pregnant when you don't want to, or... you know, bleeding, and cramps, and emotions, and PMS, and... you know, it's... it's a whole new thing, and you... you grow with it where it's like "I can welcome this," it's kind of nice to not have to deal with this. Umm... but yeah, there's... you know, it's mixed. (Sarah, Caucasian, 51 years old)

In general, the participants realistically recognized a variety of health issues and death worries as age-related concerns. Some women were particularly worried about their future physical and/or mental functioning, and talked about how the possible decline would impact their identities, roles, relationships, or self-perceptions. For others, potential health problems did not monopolize their thoughts, but were nevertheless perceived as essential considerations about getting older. Menopause was usually, though not always, seen by those who mentioned it as a collection of unpleasant medical symptoms, and its symbolic significance for those who described it as a milestone did not appear to have serious repercussions in terms of how they saw themselves in relation to their most valued identities.

Physical Appearance

Like health issues, changes in physical appearance were frequently mentioned by the participants as actual or potential outcomes of their aging. The types of exterior transformations that women invoked were unsurprising, as they typically included wrinkles, gray hair, weight gain, or other similar changes that are commonly expected as part of the aging process. However, it was remarkable that a considerable proportion of the participants perceived such physical signs as value-neutral or as having no impact on their core identities, and some actually welcomed the alterations of their appearance and thought they benefitted them personally or socially. In a few cases, the interviewees did

not mention exterior looks at all, even though they were prompted to talk about changes that they had noticed in both their bodies and appearance.

Of course, there were also a number of participants who resented what they viewed as a decline in their physical appearance. Yet, those women did not always feel that the physical changes had the potential to threaten their core identities. Moreover, contrary to the research expectations, the valued identities that participants mentioned as possibly being challenged by the loss of their youthful looks usually did not revolve around maintaining or securing romantic relationships. Thus, changes in physical appearance emerged as a common, but not particularly profound complaint about getting older.

Margarita, for example, laughingly stressed how much she hated her white hair as well as some other visible changes to her face, which she was taking care of more carefully than in her younger years. At the same time, she noted that those changes did not affect her important identities or roles: her family was loving and accepting, and her husband was extremely supportive and unconcerned with her looks.

I hate the white hair. I HATE the white hair! (laughing) [...] My sister is older... is older than me and she doesn't have it. [...] And I have white and that's why I commented, that's why I don't like the... I think that's the first thing that you see, and you know sometimes the face, you see the face that is changing – I say “Oh, I need to put maybe... now maybe I need to put more things.” (laughing)
(Margarita, Latina, 51 years old)

Jennifer likewise asserted that the thin lines on her face and having some gray hair were decidedly negative developments. Yet, even though she was not happy about those changes, they did not affect her “really solid” marital and family relationships or the way

she saw herself. Instead, her main concern as a college student in her forties was age-based discrimination on the job market.

I: So would you say that these changes that you described are mostly negative signs, or do you view them as neutral, or is there something positive about them?

P: Negative. No. (laughing) Nothing positive.

I: And what do these changes mean to you in terms of how you see yourself?

P: Hmm... I think my primary concern is not... how do I wanna say that? I don't care if my hair is grey; I'm not thrilled with lines on my face, but it's really not a big deal. I think my primary concern is: am I going to be perceived as too old to get a job? So... yeah, it's mostly how is it going to be perceived in the job market, in competing for that Ph.D. spot, and all of that. (Jennifer, Caucasian, 43 years old)

Stephanie was also among those seriously bothered by the appearance of wrinkles and other signs of aging on her face, and she claimed that lack of money was the only obstacle preventing her from getting a quick plastic surgery fix. However, much like in the case of Margarita and Jennifer, her negativity surrounding her changing appearance had little to do with heterosexual attractiveness. Although she was married to and financially supported by a much younger man and had considered the possibility of him leaving for a younger woman, Stephanie did not appear concerned about that scenario. As one of the participants who had long outgrown the traditional marriage ideal, pleasing her husband by acting or looking a certain way was not among her priorities, and she had no plans of ever entering another romantic relationship if her current (second) marriage were to end. Even though, as will be shown later, Stephanie had concerns about her future financial safety, she believed that other people such as her daughter, friends, or first husband would prevent her from becoming homeless. It is also noteworthy that looking older was not what deterred Stephanie from envisaging future heterosexual pursuits. In

fact, she felt that it would only take her “approximately fifteen minutes” to find a man “to hook up with,” despite being fifty-one and having a “big butt and everything else.”

P: I used to have like this peaches and cream complexion, I mean... like no wrinkles, I... These – I hate these. (pointing at her face) If I could have these taken care of, I’d be... and if I ever get the money, I’m getting the quick lift. OK, I hate that, the gravity thing. Umm...

I: So the crow’s feet, how do they call them?

P: Yees, oooh! Oh, I hate them, hate them, hate them! And I’ve always been very conscious about this, you know, don’t do this, you don’t wanna get this one, cause this one’s bad, hard to get rid of, and you don’t want a Botox. [...] I mean, I guess maybe I would do it if it got worse, but... and I could afford it, that’s the thing, it’s very expensive. (Stephanie, Caucasian, 51 years old)

Interestingly, it was Elizabeth, the Los Angeles-born Hispanic woman whose life revolved around her faith mission, for whom physical appearance and the idea of plastic surgery carried the deepest meanings. After having recently found a younger partner who fully shared her convictions and supported her volunteering endeavors, she suddenly became uneasy about her aging looks and began wondering whether they might interfere with the long-term prospects of that relationship. While she felt “accepted unconditionally” by her partner, Elizabeth brought up plastic surgery as a possible way of minimizing her own as well as her partner’s potential discomfort with the ten-year age difference.

I do feel... umm... that there’s that potential [for the relationship to be threatened] in 15 or 20 years if we end up becoming life partners. I feel that there’s that potential, and it’s my own little bit of anxiety, my own maybe... little bit of discomfort with the age difference. You know, it’s only ten years, it just... it’s a little bit. Umm... it’s something that I think about. And, as a result – I will be quite honest – as a result, though I’ve never considered it before, I’m thinking “Well, maybe I can do some cosmetic things.” And that’s not something that I had seriously considered before. So, it is something that I think about now. I don’t know if I’ll actually have the nerve to do it, but I think about it. (Elizabeth, Latina, 60 years old)

A couple of women in their forties thought that looking older might constitute a disadvantage in areas of life that were important to them, and were thankful for maintaining their youthful looks and thereby avoiding those negative implications. Linda, who was finishing college and preparing her transition to graduate school believed that looking younger than her age would benefit her during that process, whereas looking her age or older might make achieving her educational goals “more difficult.”

I: So you don't really see your age as an obstacle to achieving these goals [...].

P: It is not a barrier, but I will have to be honest, if I looked my age or if I looked older than my age, it would probably be more difficult. I'm realistic about that.

(Linda, Caucasian, 44 years old)

Amy, a forty year-old artist, similarly felt fortunate that members of her audience tended to think she was younger than her actual age. Although she expressed some concern about her physical appearance changing in the next few years, she was confident in her ability to prevent a middle-aged exterior, which she conceptualized as a disadvantage in her performative endeavors, from defining her. Ironically, even though Amy talked extensively about other people's perceptions, her own prejudices surrounding aging and a fear of enacting the stereotypes that she had internalized seemed to haunt her at least as much as a possibly negative reaction from her audience.

I'm waiting for the day, and it's gonna happen, when somebody's gonna go “What are you, 40 – 44 – 45?” And I'm gonna go, “Yes.” And, you know, I think it will be an impact at first, but I think it's gonna be OK, I don't think I'm gonna go, “Oh my God, I'm old, I need a facelift now” [...]. But, I don't think it's gonna define who I am, because I... I mean, I'm writing and doing all these other things, and I'm very creative and... and I also think that the fact that I am mentoring teens and hopefully a little bit of that young blood will rub off on me, umm... and I'll be able to see things. (Amy, Caucasian, 40 years old)

In contrast to the above participants who described the changes in their appearance as negative to various degrees, other women thought of them as having no significance at all or, in a few cases, as having positive implications. Olivia, a 48 year-old Latina immigrant, stated that the multiplying wrinkles on her face were “neutral” for her – “it doesn’t matter.” While unsure about her future with her breadwinning husband, with whom she did not have a particularly close relationship, Olivia was highly invested in motherhood, religion, and her friendships, and did not appear concerned about the image that she projected.

Kerry, who had been married to an Arab man for a very long time and adopted some of his cultural values – including, perhaps, those related to female modesty – also explained how little she cared about exterior looks. Even though she subtly revealed her preference for a younger appearance by confessing her satisfaction with being perceived as younger than her age, Kerry convincingly argued that her self-image and important identities were not dependent upon her looks.

I’ve never been a person, not... not past about the age of 20, have I been a person that has been preoccupied with my looks. And... nor have I been concerned that my husband would leave me, you know, for... for a better woman or whatever. I have more confidence in myself, and my... what am I trying to say? There’s more to a person than that, for me. [...] I don’t even think about it – you see, I don’t... I’m not wearing makeup, I’m a very low maintenance woman, you know, so this... I don’t care, I don’t care. [...] And I realize that you’re not as attractive at 60 as you were when you were 25, but that’s not something that’s ever really upset me much, you know. [...] I don’t care, it doesn’t bother me, you know. Umm... I am what I am, and I’m thankful that most people don’t think I’m as old as I am anyway, so... (laughing) I tell people I’ll be 50, they go “50?!” (laughing) [...] My mother doesn’t look 70, so I got good genes. But it’s just... [...] I don’t worry about it, you know. (Kerry, Caucasian, 49 years old)

Norma, a Mexican immigrant whose beautiful appearance had once conferred her numerous advantages and represented a major component of her younger identity, was initially shocked to realize that she was no longer the focus of men's attention. However, at 54, she had completely accepted her exterior as part of who she was, and despite her awareness of what constitutes a "pretty" appearance, did not evaluate herself by such standards.

I have been a... a fatty person, a chubby person my complete life. But I have been a very attractive lady. When you... when you... eh... walk down the street and most of the men just turn their head, you know you are attractive. Eh... despite my disconnection in the world, I always, always noticed all the men turn to watch me, to see me. And at some point of the life, nobody watch me. (laughing) I am walking, I am walking down and nobody turns the... the... and that was a... important change that made me... at the beginning made me very concerned, make me sad, make me "Oh my God." But at this point, no. At this point I... I can see – when I see myself at the mirror, I can see "OK, you are no pretty anymore." But I don't care, I don't care, is... this is me, this is me. (Norma, Latina, 54 years old)

Even though Norma's early career in her native country had been boosted by her attractive looks, she believed that her professional advancement in the U.S. would depend primarily on her competencies and ability to pass the required exams. Moreover, while finding a romantic partner was one of her major goals for the future, Norma did not seem to think that her aging appearance per se was an obstacle to realizing it. As a highly educated woman who hoped to meet a similarly sophisticated man, she had found that her success on dating websites was limited to much less educated candidates such as truck drivers. Norma attributed this trend to her failure to engage in practices such as losing weight, styling her hair, or improving the quality of her clothes, which she believed are expected of professional women in this society. Yet, she was hesitant to work on

developing an “excellent appearance” simply in order to be noticed by men in her intellectual league, and wondered why others could not see who she was without such pretense.

The ladies that are in the market are fancy and, you know, the hair and things like that. And maybe that, but I was thinking if I insist, I can find a person who doesn't care too much about the physical appearance. Um-um, no. [...] Maybe I have to change a little bit my... my appearance, I have to work on that, because I agree (laughing) about I have to... I have to work on that, but I don't want to... You know, I know I should, but I don't want to. You know, this... I am like mad, because people is not able to think about who I am without good appearance. Or excellent appearance, because I have good appearance. Is not excellent appearance. (Norma, Latina, 54 years old)

Like Norma, Susan was among those women for whom physical appearance had been very important in the past. Yet, at 56, she was even more categorical than the above participants in stating that she was “absolutely not” concerned about her important identities (which included mother, wife, friend, and religious person) being challenged by an aging appearance. While Susan acknowledged that the physical changes influenced the way she saw herself and how people responded to her, she stressed that they were neither good nor bad. In fact, she seemed to tacitly endorse some of the novel reactions of others as quite desirable, especially in those cases when young men or women viewed her as a non-threatening person and were consequently more inclined to approach her for help.

It does impact the way people respond to me. Little children now respond to me as a grandma person, not as a mommy person. [...] Young men will often ask me for assistance in stores very comfortably, because I'm... I'm a non-threatening grandma kind of person. [...] Young women... and I've only had this a couple of times, umm... will turn to me if they're troubled. I see them... I've had this happen one time – quite horrifically, a young woman had been assaulted and I happened to see her walking down the street, and I got her into my car and took her to get some care, but she was... she was just on the edge, poor thing, following this – what a nightmare for her – and she was so happy to be with an older woman. Umm... so that was... that was good. [...] Elderly people, my

father's generation, respond to me one of two ways. Umm... either they will say "Oh, you're a cute young thing," which is always very gratifying – not true, but entertaining – or they will see me as a caregiver. [...] People in my demographic don't respond to me differently one way or another, I'm simply part of the crowd, they respond to me as they would respond to any other man, woman in the same demographic, so that's a non-event. (Susan, Caucasian, 56 years old)

Debbie similarly thought that an older female appearance tends to be perceived as non-threatening, and therefore counted her physical aging as an advantage in her future nursing career. Although she also used to "really worry" about her looks in her youth, she now liked her "very gray" hair, which she had ceased dying after leaving the corporate world to become a student and was determined to never dye it again.

I think in one way... umm... being physically older is a benefit, I think, for especially like going into nursing, I think that being an older looking woman is reassuring to people. Like they have... nobody feels intimidated by an older woman, so I think that that will actually be a benefit in the future in my new career. (Debbie, Caucasian, 46 years old)

Helen appeared to derive an even greater amount of joy from age-related changes in her appearance, which, in addition to gray hair, also included having a tooth-free mouth. Despite her dentist's intention to try to salvage as many of her decaying teeth as possible, she had insisted on having them all removed and was still very happy with that decision. She described how much fun she had manipulating her flexible face, and explained that she rarely used her dentures – in fact, she had once forgotten them in storage for over a year without noticing their absence, and was not wearing them during our discussion either. Helen was not particularly interested in interacting with other people, let alone marrying again after her three divorces, and preferred to focus on her many hobbies, arts, and crafts instead. Thus, evaluations of her appearance by others

were largely irrelevant for her valued identities, and this indifference seemed to allow Helen an extraordinary amount of freedom to explore the (almost unthinkable) possibilities afforded by alterations in the shape of her body.

P: I like my gray hair. And actually, I like not having my teeth in. I can do a lot more with my face. (laughing) Yeah...

I: What do you mean, you...?

P: Umm... I think my face is a lot more EXPRESSIVE than it used to be, and (laughing) sometimes I have when I'll just go and look in the mirror and just make faces at myself (laughing) that... things that weren't nearly as much fun when I had teeth – now my face is like made out of rubber... umm... and it is fun. (laughing)

Equally revealing of a lack of concern about one's aging looks was the complete absence of allusions to external appearance in several women's accounts of physical changes. These participants tended to be older and already suffering from various ailments, which might explain why the functioning of their bodies figured so prominently in their responses and eclipsed any other considerations related to physical aging. As discussed earlier, in the case of 64 year-old Teresa, an overwhelming preoccupation with health informed all her major life decisions, including the choice to keep working to maintain her health insurance in spite of already having several chronic conditions. While she was committed to helping her abusive husband with his own health problems, her valued identities, which revolved around grandchildren, church, friends, and giving to others seemed entirely unrelated to her looks. Sixty-five year-old Anne had an even longer history of physical illnesses, but her identities as a long-term partner, sister, friend, and volunteer were similarly unaffected by her appearance.

In conclusion, participants' perceptions of changes in their physical appearance ranged from very negative to positive, with many women in between having either

expressed neutrality or nor even mentioned exterior looks at all as a notable part of their aging experience. While these results are surprising given the emphasis on the negative connotations of women's aging looks in the feminist literature, they are consistent with the assertion that women can, and often do, transcend societal beauty standards as they get older (e.g., Greer, 1992). In fact, as mentioned in the previous chapter, several participants were explicit about having abandoned the preoccupation with looks that had defined them earlier in life. Further contradicting this study's expectations, White women with high levels of education and/or income were not more likely than Latinas and participants with a lower socioeconomic status to feel negatively about age-related changes in their looks.

Whereas heterosexual attractiveness was rarely the reason behind women's complaints about getting an older appearance, several participants worried about its impact on their careers. At the same time, others thought that physical aging had the potential to enhance their job prospects, or at least their work performance. Thus, there appeared to be no consistent relationship between particular identities such as a high investment in one's career and perceptions of the impact on aging on exterior looks. While the problematic trend of requiring or expecting a youthful physical appearance in a variety of female occupations has been previously recognized (Jones & Chandler, 2007), the reverse pattern of valuing older women for their caregiving capabilities emerged as a similarly stereotypical, but desirable phenomenon in the accounts of some participants.

Prejudice and Discrimination

Much has been written about the devaluation of older people, particularly women, in Western societies. Mirroring the concerns outlined in the aging literature, several well-

educated participants such as Sarah, Linda, and Peggy talked eloquently about the youth-oriented culture characteristic of this country, which “doesn’t let [women] age.” Thus, it is not surprising that many other women complained about or expected to encounter various forms of prejudice and discrimination as they age. While it was sometimes unclear whether the problematic attitudes or behaviors invoked by the participants had a gendered character, they nevertheless attest to the continued existence of negative stereotypes that affect the lives of middle-aged and older individuals. The themes that have emerged from women’s depictions of their concerns about age-related prejudice and discrimination include lack of respect for older people; job discrimination; and medical practitioners’ prejudices about middle-aged and older women.

Lack of Respect.

Complaints about society’s lack of respect for older people featured prominently in several women’s accounts. Even though some of these women were not old enough to have fully experienced the negative attitudes themselves, they nevertheless feared becoming increasingly disrespected as they got older. One illustrative example of this concern was Kimberly, who at the age of sixty-three had participated extensively (for more than thirty years) in the volunteering arena. She now belonged to a “senior volunteer group” (a label that still startled her), but thought that older people are not respected or treated the same in that world – as she put it, “you haven’t got the validity,” “you’re not part of things necessarily.” Although she made an effort to come up with possible objective reasons for older volunteers’ marginalization such as their slowness, or being “out of the working world,” or being technologically challenged, Kimberly’s perception that age itself is a major cause of that disrespect was reinforced by her

observation that older individuals are treated poorly in other settings as well. Moreover, she believed that young people are primarily responsible for disrespecting not only the elderly, but also each other, and pointed to the youth's general attitudes as the possible source of the problems she feared. Thus, even though Kimberly did not feel devalued in her important roles as wife and mother and explained that she and her family members were "all growing older together," she was very concerned about her, as well as, perhaps, her husband's diminishing social status.

I just think it's generally – on the street, in the restaurant, you know, in the theater, in... you know, every aspect... umm... even in the church, I mean, it's just... so maybe I should blame the young people, as opposed to the aging. You know, there's just no respect of any sort for people.
 We [she and her husband] don't [experience prejudice] so much, but [...] I see it around me, and I see as you get older... I mean, I am a bit, and my husband, but I don't think we're quite there yet, you know, where, you know, you're disrespected to a certain point, but... I don't know, I... I... I can't exactly explain it, but it's there, you know, but I don't think the young people respect, you know, each other, let alone, you know, their elders. (laughing) (Kimberly, Caucasian, 63 years old)

Teresa was similarly dismayed at the lack of respect coming from the younger generations, but in her case the objection was based on painful personal experiences, rather than on noticing how others were treated. Although she did not believe that the youngest members of her family were much better than others in the amount of respect they were showing to older persons, she was making an effort to teach them that respect. Being highly invested in her grandchildren, the possibility of being called names by her own offspring seemed particularly unwelcome.

P: It's scary, sometimes you see these young people, the way they talk, the way they treat you, they don't thinking "Oh, the 64 woman." Oh no, that bad to you. No respect, when they only fourteen, twelve, ten, I don't think is fair. I don't know what kind of family they have, but, you know, living like that, starting

living like that in that age to be big man no respect, no nothing, why respecting in the future?

I: So is it... are the young children in your family different, do they have respect?

P: You know, they not big different, but at least we show them respect the older people. Because I don't wanna go to my daughter's house and my child, my grandbaby call me a bad name, because is not fair. I don't show them to not respect me. They need to respect the grandma because that's what, you know, give respect to everybody, I expecting for me too. (Teresa, Latina, 64 years old)

Susan also invoked her personal experiences with discrimination as she described the social invisibility that she had been subjected to. Whereas complaints about older women becoming invisible during everyday activities such as shopping or dining at restaurants are common in the feminist literature (e.g., Greer, 1992), it was interesting that Susan's problematic encounters were confined to two youth-oriented cities. Perhaps it was this lack of generalizability of her poor treatment that allowed Susan to continue to feel empowered as a customer, as opposed to internalizing the humiliation of being ignored. As a financially well-off person with close and stable familial and community bonds, she framed the issue of her invisibility in those two cities as an appalling business practice leading to the withdrawal of her valuable monetary support, rather than as an instance of personal victimization.

The only thing I've really noticed in terms of a response that I don't care for is not a response I've ever had in this city. In fact, I've only ever had this response in Los Angeles or Las Vegas, where apparently the cult of the young and beautiful supersedes everything, and I disappear. If I go to a restaurant or to a store and I need assistance, I can't get it until I start waving around a platinum card or a black card, and all of a sudden they'll show up and be at my fingertips. But I disappear as a customer because I don't fit, I would imagine, the young beautiful type. Only in those two cities! I never see it in, you know, New York, San Francisco, Atlanta, London, Madrid, anywhere. Only in LA and Las Vegas, but that is what it is and I solve the problem by not going to LA and Las Vegas, cause why put yourself in a position of... of having to work to get something that they should be doing because that's their job. [...] You know, pick a store chain that's national, and I can go into it in any other city and receive assistance and gracious

participation in my shopping experience, and I go into one in LA or... or Las Vegas and I disappear. I watch me fade into nothing, and I think “Wow, this is really odd and very silly on behalf of the retailers, they’re missing, you know, we’re disposable income, why would you do this?” (laughing) [...] And I figure that would be their problem, not mine. They... they’ve lost my revenue. They’ve lost my commission – what a bummer! (Susan, Caucasian, 56 years old)

Kimberly, Teresa, and Susan’s observations regarding lack of respect for older people were echoed by some of the younger participants as well. Forty year-old Amy looked even younger than her years and had a passion for mentoring and artistically performing in front of children and young adults, who sometimes perceived her as their peer and were surprised to find out her age. Yet, she was similarly bothered by children’s lack of respect for their elders, and did her best to discipline them whenever she had the chance. To prove her point, Amy recounted a couple of incidents in which she disciplined a waiter for being rude to her demented grandfather, or some children in the street for nearly knocking over an old lady without even turning around to see how she was doing. She strongly believed that today’s children are not taught the respect for the elderly that had been ingrained in her. Nevertheless, consistent with her assertive personality, she felt determined to fight back if she were to be treated poorly in the future.

It is something that a lot of children aren’t taught these days, they don’t respect their elders, they don’t care that they’re older, they don’t have any... cause I’ve had to say “Hey, I’m older than you” in the past to kids. I’ll be more assertive, and I don’t... because I don’t like that, you shouldn’t live in fear, you shouldn’t, and elderly people, I see a lot of elderly live in fear, they’re afraid... I’m sorry, carry a gun then, shoot somebody. (Amy, Caucasian, 40 years old)

Fifty-one year-old Stephanie also felt that “things are just different” compared to when she was growing up, and that there is a lack of manners and respect for others,

including older persons, teachers, and even the president of the country. While this made her “feel really old sometimes,” she was trying, like the other participants, to teach her adult daughter and her grandson more respectful behaviors.

It is interesting to note that in all of the above examples, the participants talked about lack of respect for the elderly in a gender-neutral fashion, and there was no suggestion (apart from, maybe, Susan’s account of her invisibility) that women are disproportionately affected by this problem. Consistent with the extensive body of literature that has documented the generally negative connotations of aging in the Western world (e.g., Biggs, 2004), the women in this study who brought up lack of respect construed it as a problem affecting women and men alike when they age and increasingly depart from the ideal of a youthful and competent adult.

One exception to this trend was Sarah, who referred more specifically to the fears of aging that haunt younger women, and the generational conflict stemming from their unpreparedness to see value in or even acknowledge the older women that they are someday going to become. While the observation that ageism (especially when combined with sexism) can lead to distancing and resentment among women of different generations has been previously articulated within the feminist literature (Cruikshank, 2003), Sara’s response to this problematic schism was particularly revealing. She not only thought it is “really nice” when there is mutual respect between successive generations of women, but also believed that each group should allow the other in their lives. Following the message of the Titus woman in the Scripture, which was mentioned in a previous chapter as an important guiding force for her, Sarah made a concerted effort

to connect with and learn from both younger and older women in her life, as well as to help them in every way that she could.

It's really nice when there's a mutual respect; I do things with younger women and I learn so much from them and appreciate it. And I know, I think they do the other way and there's a security that people have that have lived some of life to say "You're gonna make it, I've been there, I'm here to tell you I survived it, and you will too." And there's a comfort for them in that. [...] I think all the way along, umm... when I was a young mother, a young college student, I've always had an older woman that has come alongside and mentored me. And I've so valued that! And... and I think it's been good for them to remember where they've come from, and what they worked through, and their children. (Sarah, Caucasian, 51 years old)

Job Discrimination.

For a few women who were highly invested in their present or future careers, discrimination on the job market was a major worry. Jennifer, for example, who was an enthusiastic college student with graduate school and professional career plans, feared rejection based on having reached middle-age. As was pointed out previously in the chapter on projected identities, although Jennifer felt confident in her own abilities ("I have a lot to offer, I'm smart, I'm dedicated, I work hard"), her optimism was tempered by the belief that others would evaluate her negatively simply as an outcome of her age. Her concerns were not completely hypothetical, either. As she was preparing for her graduate school applications, Jennifer had shockingly come across an out-of-state program whose (informal) rule was not to admit applicants over the age of forty-five.

I called one college to talk to them about their Ph.D. program, and I said "OK, if I wait, will that be bad for me?" And they said "Well, don't wait too long cause we don't take people over 45." [...] Actually I couldn't believe it, I was like "Excuse me?! Say again?" It's a program where they pay you... so it's full scholarship and a stipend and... they said "Well, we're making investment and we want a long term investment, so if you're 45 you're gonna retire at 65, that's only twenty years. If you're 25, we get forty years for our investment. So it's not ageism, it's

just practical.” And I’m thinking “No, it’s ageism, (laughing) it’s not OK.” So yeah, it was pretty surprising. I think that was one of those real defining age moments. (Jennifer, Caucasian, 43 years old)

Toni, a 58 year-old Caucasian woman with a doctorate, was mentioned previously as someone who had not gained professional respect and thought her chances of career success were getting slimmer as she aged. She also believed that, ironically, the lack of financial and other rewards was further reinforcing her drive to succeed. This predicament was particularly disconcerting given Toni’s fairly distant relationships with her husband and friends, which appeared to leave her particularly vulnerable to the evolution of her career. In fact, her field of research and practice was the main aspect defining Toni’s present and future existence, along with an appreciation for and desire to remain in good health.

Fifty-nine year-old Peggy similarly had a Ph.D. but, unlike Toni, felt more connected to her friends and was devoted to various political and environmental causes that she strongly believed in. However, having always been single and focused on her rewarding professional career, the possibility of losing her job as a result of budget cuts and not being able to secure another one because of her age seemed very threatening.

I’ve worked long enough that my... salary has sort of crept up, so that... you know, I have work experience, umm... so, you know, all that is good, and the negative side is... you know, if I were to lose my job here because of the budget crisis in the state, I’m in a demographic where I don’t think anyone’s going to want to hire me. You know, so that’s the big negative, you know. (Peggy, Caucasian, 59 years old)

Despite these examples, it is worth reiterating that not all participants felt that their age was likely to impede their future career. Linda and Debbie were also Caucasian

college students of approximately the same age as Jennifer, but believed that the added experience they had compared to traditional college students would enhance, rather than diminish their employability. While it may be hard to pinpoint the precise causes of these striking differences in expectations about age-related biases on the job market, it is interesting to note that Linda came from an upper middle-class family, and therefore her belief that “there’s nothing that can stop me” may have originated from a more general sense of control gained from having had opportunities conferred to her by that privileged status. Debbie, like Jennifer, came from a lower-class background, but her previous career had been financially successful and perhaps contributed to her confidence that she would achieve the same level of success in subsequent endeavors. Thus, consistent with the formulated expectations, visions of one’s career may constitute one area in which socioeconomic factors play a role in the extent to which women feel that they have control over their future as they age. Of course, it also needs to be acknowledged that it may be difficult for women, regardless of their background and possible feelings of control, to ignore or dismiss direct evidence of age discrimination such as the one Jennifer encountered in her graduate school inquiries, which underscores the limitations of focusing on only a few variables such as age, ethnicity or social class when trying to understand women’s feelings about aging.

Medical Practitioners’ Prejudices.

Another form of prejudice involved medical practitioners’ overwhelmingly negative perceptions of middle-aged and older women’s health, which were sometimes conveyed to their female patients in a blatant, humiliating manner. Peggy recalled one particularly traumatic incident that had occurred a few years prior to our discussion, in

which a young nurse had domineeringly instructed her how to prepare for the presumed inevitability of her plummeting health.

A few years ago, I had gone for some health checkup and there's this really young nurse, and she... she said – she got this really bossy tone in her voice – and she said “Well, you're going to have to keep everything picked up around your house, because you don't want to be falling and breaking any bones at this point.” And I didn't say anything, but she said it in a really bossy sort of way, and I thought – I think I was about 55 at that point – and I thought... “What does she think a 55 year-old person is?” (laughing) You know, that she would use that tone of voice, like I was just an accident waiting to happen. (laughing) So I thought that was interesting, and I figure that's just gonna get worse, you know. (laughing) (Peggy, Caucasian, 59 years old)

Sixty-five year-old Anne had experienced such warnings at the even earlier age of forty, when a variety of doctors let her know that she was entering a new age category, characterized by increasing health problems in multiple areas.

When I turned 40 it was kind of a hard year because every doctor's appointment I had, “Now that you're 40, you gotta have bifocals,” or “Now that you're 40, you gotta do this.” You know, and I thought “Well, they keep reminding me like this... I'm at a milestone and I've got to do... all these things are starting to go wrong with me, right?” (Anne, Caucasian, 65 years old)

Given the widespread medicalization of women's aging in this society (Greer, 1992), these two participants' complaints about health professionals' attitudes are not entirely surprising. Instead, their resistance is perhaps more remarkable than the incidents themselves, as it reveals women's agency in relation to mainstream discourses that define them as physically weakening and powerless.

Financial Concerns

Finally, concerns about financial safety colored several women's visions about their aging. Perhaps as a consequence of the country's economic situation at the time of

the interviews, participants with a variety of educational and occupational backgrounds felt uneasy about finances and being able to maintain their standard of living as they get older. Kimberly, an early retiree with a seemingly adequate income, whose “wonderful retirement” of fourteen years included traveling as well as the companionship of her husband and friends, talked about having had to “scale down” in the previous five years and feeling less safe than she used to before the recession.

We retired so young, you know, [...] we thought things were going to be fine... And with the economy, you know, that we're living in now, I think we'll be OK, but it's not as secure as it was five years ago. And so I think, you know, we probably look at that a little bit more, and so we've kind of scaled down, and we're happy (Kimberly, Caucasian, 63 years old)

Even in the case of professional women who were still employed and had middle-class incomes, a potential job loss in their fifties or sixties appeared very threatening. For Peggy, the 59 year-old single professional who thought that losing her job due to budget cuts would have likely meant not being able to find adequate employment again because of age discrimination, the financial consequences of such a scenario were quite problematic. Sandra, a 54 year-old Latina professional who had chosen to work for the government because she deemed that sector safer, was also considering the less than optimal alternative of moving back to Mexico, where the cost of living is lower, if she were to lose her job.

The most dramatic were the concerns of Stephanie, a high-school graduate who had been laid off two years prior to our discussion and was unable to find paid work commensurate with her experience. Even as she was living in a small house on her husband's relatively modest income, images of homeless life in Reno haunted her.

Having previously dealt with drug addiction and the lack of a stable home despite her middle-class family background, Stephanie feared finding herself again in that predicament. Whereas she did not feel particularly attached to her much younger husband (“If he decides, you know, he finally meets some young chickie that floats his boat, get on down the road”), she invoked family and friends as a safety net that would prevent her worst fears from coming true. It is also worth noting that Stephanie was among those participants for whom material things had lost much of their appeal, which underscores the fact that it was financial security, rather than abundance that she was seeking.

A roof over my head, that’s most important thing to me that I won’t have to go... not that my daughter would ever allow this to happen. Or even my ex-husband... No, my friends would take care of me, but... (laughing) I don’t wanna ever have to worry about living on Fourth Street in a tent, I don’t wanna have to ever worry about eating cat food – those are my fears for the future. That I’ll be cold, that I’ll live somewhere in the snow and have a sleeping bag... That’s my fear for the future. (Stephanie, Caucasian, 51 years old)

In conclusion, financial worries emerged as an important dimension to be considered among women’s concerns about their aging. Although job loss may affect women differently based on factors such as level of education, previous income, or availability of other resources, economic uncertainty was invoked by participants with a variety of social class standings. Thus, even women with a high level of education and well-paying jobs sometimes did not feel immune to the effects of larger economic forces operating at the time of the study.

Psychological and Other Gains

Even though the existing literature is divided in its depictions of women's subjective experiences of aging, accounts of positive feelings and of various gains, especially in the psychological realm, are not uncommon. As noted in the review of previous studies, Miner-Rubino, Winter, and Stewart (2004, p. 1599) have found that as they aged, women reported higher levels of identity certainty (defined as "an affirmed sense of self and of one's place in the social world") and confident power (meaning "feelings of mastery and competence"). In more autobiographically-informed writings, Germaine Greer (1992) described the feelings of authenticity, serenity, and freedom that older women may experience despite (or perhaps because of) being rendered useless by society, while Gloria Steinem (1994) pointed out women's freedom of self-expression and potential for radicalization in the social and political arenas at the time in their lives when the pressures of youth and beauty subside.

In light of the above authors' results and observations, it is not surprising that a majority of the women in the present study brought up these or other types of changes as desirable outcomes of getting older. Indeed, most participants attributed significant benefits to aging and accumulating life experiences, and sometimes thought of them as exceeding in importance any physical or social losses that they also noticed. Thus, without being in denial about the negative implications of living in a youth-based culture or about the health issues associated with getting older, a significant portion of the women still concluded that aging entailed primarily gains for them. It was particularly interesting to hear some of the participants compare and contrast the positive and

negative consequences of aging, as well as their explanations as to why the (mostly psychological) gains often took precedence over other concerns.

Perhaps the most explicit articulation of the asymmetrical relationship between gains and losses can be seen in Norma's account. In spite of acknowledging a variety of physical losses related to aging, she believed that the psychological gains were far more important and that overall, getting older had made her a person better equipped to deal with the interpersonal challenges inherent to the different life arenas that mattered to her. After having struggled with an inability to "make contact with the reality" that affected her work, family, and romantic relationships during her younger years, Norma concluded that she was now in a better position to achieve her goals of advancing in her career, finding a partner, and mending the strained relationship with her sister because "my dreams are not physical. My dreams are emotional, and spiritual, and professional." Even though, as pointed out earlier in this chapter, the idea of having to work on her physical appearance to attract higher status men really bothered her, Norma seemed to be gaining, rather than losing confidence in her abilities to accomplish her dreams as she aged.

P: I feel I am losing a little bit of my physical skills, I feel like I have pain, I can no get my foot easily, I lost my teeth, and things like that - is a little bit uncomfortable. But it's OK, it's OK, it's something that is coming because my body have worked. And I think it's normal, it's... it's something that I have to get used, and is not important for me. I know physically I am no that good skilled, but as a person I'm better skilled. Then I have to go slow or slower, I have to... But you know what? The important things for me now are in my heart and in my... in my brain. Then I don't think the physical losing of skills is important. I think is normal, but is no related... I am not losing nothing. Is just I'm going through the normal thing, that's the aging for me. Is I am the same person, maybe a better person because the age, because my learning, because my experience, I am a better person, but maybe slower, maybe slower or no that pretty.

I: So, would you say that for you now, the way you see it now, umm... aging involves primarily gains or losses?

P: Gains, absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah. Yes, gains. I can tell you for me, the physical thing is a 20 percent of my... of my value to see something. (Norma, Latina, 54 years old)

Sandra, also a Latina professional, similarly acknowledged the physical part of aging as hard from the point of view of health (the body not responding like before) and appearance (losing “confidence in the way that you look”), but explained enthusiastically that otherwise, it was “one hundred percent benefit.” She felt fortunate to belong to a generation that, she believed, equates age with wisdom, and was glad to have learned from her past mistakes. Thus, she argued that aging brings “a lot of resources to handle your life” and that she can now make better decisions while also enjoying things more. Even though motherhood had been Sandra’s most central identity since a very young age and she still had a great relationship with her independent, grown-up kids, she was glad to be done with childrearing and hoped to eventually experience romance again, at a time in her life when freedom from other responsibilities would allow her “to really be with someone with full commitment” like never before. Despite having some insecurities about how her older body might be evaluated by a potential intimate partner, she felt very positively about herself in all respects.

I feel that my brains, my soul, my mind, my emotions are more in my favor than ever have been. And I feel totally confident in life, in the future, I feel happy about the past, I feel that the moment is the moment. [...] I feel nice, I feel attractive, I feel successful, I feel competent, I feel even beauty... feelings that I didn’t have before, that I have doubts about that, you know. And it’s not that the mirror is reflecting anything better. It’s not that. (laughing) It’s just that I like myself more than... than before. [...] I just feel that it’s my time! I never felt better. (Sandra, Latina, 54 years old)

Margarita, another Latina participant in her fifties, was also noticing undesirable changes in the functioning of her body. However, like Norma and Sandra, she invoked inside gains such as maturity, being calmer, and having more experience to share with others as compensating for the physical losses. As a professional, she was glad to have achieved financial stability and to be able to support her less well-off relatives from Latin America. Throughout her discourse, Margarita reiterated several times that she did not “feel old at all,” and stressed that not only mentally, but also physically she was acting in youthful ways, which she described as uncharacteristic of her ethnic culture. Interestingly, a benefit that uniquely emerged from her account was an increased understanding of family members from the previous generation such as her dad and her aunt, as a result of having reached the age that they used to be when she was growing up.

I think I am losing things, but in another way I can see me more mature in other things, I can see things in different way, maybe more calm down than before, I can see other thing more in the future... [...] It's more physical thing that you are losing, but I think... inside you feel the... a little bit you are getting more calm down, more... you help other people because, you know... more, you have experience to share, I can see that part. [...] I think being in the age that I am and have a stable job, I can see that now I can help my family, I think... they can see me as a support, and I feel comfortable to be supporting them. I feel that part is good... But physically I think I am losing things, that's what I feel, that's what I feel that part. [...] But, you know what, [...] I feel inside the same way. You know, sometimes the body sometime now don't respond when... but I feel in the same way, and this is another thing that I think – for my age, I do things that other people maybe don't do, Hispanic don't do. I like to dress up, I like to do a lot of things. They say “Margarita, you have high heels.” I like high heels, I really like it. I have a lot of shoes, I like to... I don't know how explain, I don't feel old, I don't feel old at all. (Margarita, Latina, 51 years old)

Along the same lines, Kerry talked about the “disturbing” disconnect between her mental vitality and her older body. Much like Margarita, she believed that aging involves emotional growth, as well as the preservation of her earlier subjectivity.

The practicality of aging, the physical of aging is difficult for me, because there's a disconnect between how old I feel here and how old the body feels. [...] I don't feel any different than I did when I was 20. I mean, I'm more mature as far as I don't get upset over stupid stuff easily, you know, and I'm... I'm more patient and all of those things – there's been emotional growth, but I don't feel... umm... I have just as many ideas, I have just as much zest for living, I have just as much interest and all of that as I did 25 years ago. But the body is not keeping up, and that I find disturbing. (Kerry, Caucasian, 49 years old)

Sixty year-old Helen did not “feel” her age either, and viewed getting older as a trade-off between physical decline and the emergence of new possibilities. Most importantly, she valued the freedom afforded by fewer time constraints and by finally having her own, even if small, personal space. Interestingly, she also remarked that as someone who had always thought of herself as “just kind of an observer of people” rather than as an active participant in relationships, expectations regarding older women's behavior are more congruent with her personality than the demands to socialize placed on women in their twenties and thirties. Thus, given Helen's passion for a wide variety of arts, crafts, and other hobbies, the newly-found freedom to pursue her interests, along with the diminished pressure to engage socially, appeared to confer her substantial advantages.

I don't feel like I'm aging, I don't feel like I HAVE aged, but at the same time, my body keeps telling me “Yes, you are. Yes, you have.” (laughing) [...] I think... there are things that are a trade-off. There are things that I CAN'T do as well, but there are other things that I'm FREE to do that I wasn't free to do before. [...] And it's not just having more time, there are a lot fewer things I have to WORRY about it seems like, too. Even though [my daughter] wasn't like a little kid, there were still things that I had to worry about as far as: getting her to school, getting... making sure that I could pick her up from school, things that I had to do at a certain time (take her to her dance classes, pick her up, go to her recitals) and... I've never been a good person about... umm... doing things on schedule. [...] So, that's something that is a trade-off, it's not just having MORE time, it's having more FLEXIBLE time. [...] Yes, I have more time... to myself and more SAY over it. And more say over... I have my room, and it's MY room.

I've never had my own room before: I've either been in the barracks with a roommate, or I've been married or... and... and that's nice! I have my own space, I have my own time. [...] My life is more mine than it's ever been. (Helen, Caucasian, 60 years old)

Whereas the above participants contrasted the gains of aging with physical losses, Sarah talked extensively about the societal prejudices against older people before describing the gains associated with this “really nice season.” Acknowledging her own biases against aging (manifested, for instance, through the negative emotions generated by other people’s questions about when she is retiring, which make her feel “put on the shelf” and “not valuable anymore”), she was making an effort to counteract such thoughts by focusing on her increased ability to mentor younger women and to give back to the community. In this sense, her commitment to volunteering and helping women of different generations served not only as a buffer against her fear of retirement, but also as a source of new challenges and meanings. Also on the positive side, as a financially stable professional, Sarah depicted older age as a period when people are in a better position economically and have more time than during their youth. On a more personal level, she noted the “security that comes with aging” and credited her long-term husband, friends, and religious faith with boosting that feeling.

There's a security that comes with aging, where you... you get a little bit more where you don't care about everybody else's feelings towards you, and you don't let a test define your worth, you don't let what other people think define your worth, and there's a comfort with that. You know, you can be terribly insecure when you think someone doesn't like you – a lot of that goes on in high school and college. I didn't get invited, I'm not included, they don't wanna sit with me, they don't want me in their study group, and it can make you feel like “What's wrong with me?” [...] And that's really nice to not have some of the insecurities that I think are there in youth.

I think as I've grown, and... umm... and I was not a secure person, and I still have my insecurities – and I think if people are honest, no one is completely

secure. Umm... definitely as I've grown in my relationship with God, if I can see myself as he sees me, you know, I was valuable enough for him to send a son to die for me – that says something. The fact that my husband loves me even when I know I'm ugly, you know, and you know when you're in... you're emotionally ugly or you're irritable and things, and you have someone that stands by and loves you anyway, yes, it gives you tremendous security. [...] When you have one friend, it can get you through a whole lot. When you know someone loves you regardless, and my husband has been that, and I have a few really close friends, you know, and it's very rare that you can say you've had a friend over 30 years, and I have a few of those – gets you through a lot. So... it does contribute to that security, it does contribute to your identity. (Sarah, Caucasian, 51 years old)

Linda was similarly aware of the negative portrayals of older women in the mass media, but counteracted their influence by choosing not to watch television and relying on “real role models” instead. Like Sarah, she stressed the importance of friendships with other women from all age groups as a source of learning and support. Thus, not only did she feel that she was “exactly where” she “should be” biologically despite her early menopause (which had benefitted her both physically and psychologically, as described earlier), but was “really happy” and wished that other women her age could feel the same way. As a single, forty-something year-old woman who had been divorced twice but was open to the possibility of romantic relationships in the future (even though she had abandoned traditional notions of marriage), Linda was comfortable with herself and rejected any cultural dichotomizations of women into either young and sexualized or old and asexual.

I think for me it's all about gains. Absolutely. [...] I don't own a television, and I have to be very honest, I think that's one of the best things for people who might have a negative connotation to aging, is to get rid of the TV, because I think our society here in the United States doesn't let us age. I am exactly where I should be. I am a 44 year old woman, and I'm not some... you know, hot and heavy 20 year old co-ed, but I'm also not a matronly woman either. But MY role models, for MY age would be somebody like Demi Moore – she's a few years older than me, but yet she is sexualized, and she allows it with her surgeries and her youthful

appearance and the things that she's done to her own body. She identifies more with her daughters, she's even [...] married to a man who's the same age as her daughter. So I think I don't have those kinds of role models in my life, I have real role models. And because I don't look to women like Demi Moore to show me what a forty-something year-old woman should look like... that I can be me. [...] Everything is about youth. But the world really isn't youth, youth is such a short period. [...] But I should be able to enjoy my life as a forty-something year-old woman, I don't think I should have to feel shame about it. (Linda, Caucasian, 44 years old)

While Linda attributed her favorable aging experiences to her refusal to succumb to cultural models that devalue older women, a couple of participants in their mid-sixties claimed that the gains (or, at least, the minimization of losses) associated with aging resulted from their voluntary effort to stay positive in the face of adversities such as poor health or retirement from a rewarding career. Sixty-five year-old Anne, for example, who suffered from a long-term chronic illness as well as from other age-related conditions, stated that aging is “all a state of mind,” and regarded positive thinking as a personal responsibility. Appearing to have internalized the notion that being older is undesirable, she made it clear that in spite of constant reminders of her physical aging, mentally she has succeeded in keeping herself young.

I: Overall, would you say that aging involves primarily gains or losses for you?

P: I think gains, because I refuse to let age make me slow down. If I can keep going, [...] maybe not the same pace I was when... before everything started breaking down, you know, that's why I make sure that I do some kind of moving every day as far as walking or... whatever, because I feel like once I stop, then I will be unable to do it. [...] Personally, I think, you know, aging... it's all a state of mind. You could be in the most perfect health, be physically capable of doing a heck of a lot more than I can do, but if you think “I'm old, I can't do that anymore” or whatever... [...] I have always been convinced that your state of mind is how you... your life will go. If you think positively or try to do things positively, it'll work for you. If you are negative and... and depressed all the time, then that's where your life's gonna be, cause as I was told once, you're the only one that can change whatever your situation is. (Anne, Caucasian, 65 years old)

When asked whether aging was helping or hurting her significant relationships (most notably, with her loving partner), Anne invoked specific gains associated with getting older such as the accumulation of knowledge and life experiences, as well as an increased ability to manage finances.

I think it's kind of helpful because, you know, the older you get the more knowledge you have, and the more experience you have, and you learn from – at least I try to learn from my mistakes, you know, and... you do things that will improve or better whatever the thing is. And... and when you're older too, umm... maybe if you struggled when you were young financially – you always do, spend more than you have, whatever, you know – but as you get older, you learn the... the art of saving, and how to stretch a buck or whatever, you know. (Anne, Caucasian, 65 years old)

Unlike Anne, Lynette viewed aging primarily as loss, and regretted no longer having the satisfaction and daily routine that she used to get from her career prior to retirement. However, she similarly emphasized the importance of maintaining a positive attitude for coping with difficult life changes, and thought that her family and going to church helped keep her “on the positive side.”

I think that you have to keep your mind on the positive side, because otherwise I can get... become very depressed over that. But [...] I've always tried to be real positive, just keep going, you know. [...] I think that... some days it would just be easy to just say “Ha, who cares,” just, you know... but yet there's always that chance the grandkids might come by or something, “Oh let me get dressed.” You know, so I think that keeps you going, you know. Somebody might call you, they might need a favor, you know. [...] A lot of times I'll think “Oh maybe, you know, maybe my son-in-law will need help or something with one of the kids today,” so let me be ready in case he calls.

You gotta keep that positive-ness going, however it is. You know, it's just like on Sunday morning – maybe I don't really feel like going to church, but “Let me go,” you know. [...] “Let me go, and, you know, say hello to a couple people, and it will make you feel good cause, you know, somebody will smile at you” And I think you just need to be on that positive side, cause once you go the other way it's hard to dig yourself back out again. (Lynette, Caucasian, 63 years old)

Elizabeth, who defined herself largely through her religious faith and giving to others, had been “very comfortable” with aging until relatively recently, when she became involved with her younger partner. Although she regarded an older appearance as a potential loss given her relationship circumstances and regretted not having left her marriage sooner to allow more time for those activities that truly inspire her, she saw definite advantages to aging as a motivator in her volunteering endeavors.

I: When you think about these things that are really important to you, [...] do you think your aging is helping or hurting the maintenance and development of these identities and relationships?

P: Oh, I think it’s definitely helping. I think my age is definitely helping. It’s a motivator, because there’s so much more that I wanna do... And being sixty and in fairly good health, umm... I can see the potential of what I can do in the next ten years, and so it’s a motivation to “Let’s just get going here,” and... umm... I think I have tried to even plan my life on a fast track, because I wanna get as much done with my... with my work and my potential partner... umm... as quickly as possible in the next ten years. (Elizabeth, Latina, 60 years old)

At forty, Amy’s youthful appearance had prevented her from being perceived by her audiences as middle-aged, and therefore her concerns about physical aging were still hypothetical. Even though, like Elizabeth, she had worried about realizing her (primarily artistic) goals in the context of limited time, Amy felt quite accomplished already and thought that the previous decade had clearly benefitted her.

I: Would you say that [aging] involves primarily gains or losses for you?

P: Gains, for sure. [...] I think... honestly, I think my life didn’t really start as far as great things... umm... until I was 30, like I don’t think... I think I was one of those people that just... umm... I didn’t really know what I wanted to do, like I didn’t really wanna go to college, I knew that, I knew that I was the best at work, umm... and so for me, aging I think has been more positive. I don’t ever look at it like “Oh my gosh, I’m getting...” I get a little weirded out around my birthday time, cause I’m like “Oh, what have I even accomplished?” But it actually has gotten easier, because I have accomplished a lot. I can google myself, which is weird. (laughing) I even got tattoos this year, at 40, and I never thought I’d get

anything this big, and I never thought I'd have it so boldly. (Amy, Caucasian, 40 years old)

There were also participants who described the benefits of aging in less ambivalent terms. Olivia, for example, felt “very good” about getting older and thought she had more maturity, more confidence in herself, and better knowledge of who she is as a person than during her younger years. In her opinion, knowledge and acceptance of self are key to being comfortable and happy as one ages. At the same time, Olivia also recognized her family, friends, and religion as a foundation for building her confidence and positive feelings, by providing reassurance that “if something go wrong, you have so many people to comfort you.”

I: When you think about your own aging, how do you feel about it?

P: I feel very good. I feel very good, [...] and I think right now in my life is the best age because you know where are you in life. Because you know what you like, and what you can say no you don't like it, and you... well in my case more mature that what I want with me, my kids, and my husband, and so my friends, and nobody can choose the things for you – because when you're young somebody can tell you [...] what you need to do or not, but experience in life will give you more [...] confidence in you. And that's what I like. [...] As you know who you are and you accept yourself [...] you're gonna feel that way, other way I don't think so you're gonna feel comfortable getting old and be happy. I think so you have to be more how you know you are and accept who you are. And be happy with yourself. [...] Because I hear so many people or I have friends too, they're not feel good about them, and things they don't like about them. And I think so you have to be more about yourself, how you accept yourself. (Olivia, Latina, 48 years old)

Emily, another Latina woman in her mid-fifties who defined herself through various family relationships (e.g., wife, mother, sister, etc) and her religious faith was emotionally ready for retirement. She looked forward to spending more time with her husband and helping her children and (future) grandchildren, and also had dreams of

traveling, an activity that she greatly enjoyed. However, she could not afford that lifestyle at the moment, and paid work represented a financial necessity. Even though she had recently lost her job and been warned by friends that finding another one at her age would be difficult, she felt “healthy,” “competent,” and optimistic about securing employment in the future. In general, Emily appeared very satisfied with her circumstances and open to the possibilities that come with getting older (“I really can’t complain, cause I... I have a nice home, I have a great husband, and I’m healthy. So, whatever comes I will just embrace.”)

Debbie also had a “very positive view on aging” and really enjoyed being middle-aged, contrary to her earlier expectations. Having raised a child, established a career, achieved financial stability, and abandoned the standards of beauty to which she had adhered in her youth, she felt liberated to do whatever she wanted – and was, in fact, pursuing a second college degree and planning to work in a field that was more meaningful to her. As someone who fully appreciated the longevity of her marriage and thought that people who divorce lose a major part of their past, Debbie felt firmly grounded in all aspects of her life and appeared completely confident in the future, even as she mused that her younger self might consider someone like her “a boring, middle-aged person.” Debbie’s optimistic outlook was accompanied by feelings of connectedness to people in general, as well as a sense of obligation to give back to others.

I have a very positive view on aging. I’m... I really like being middle-aged, it’s a good place to be, I’ll tell you. (laughing) [...] I feel like the really hard, like physical part of life as far as like raising a child, and establishing a career, or just proving to yourself that you can be successful, or, you know, getting some financial... umm... stability, that part is done, I don’t have to worry about that anymore [...] and I can just focus on whatever I want, you know. If I decide I wanna be an artist, I can be an artist. If I decide I want to, you know, be a nurse, I

can do nursing. If I decide I want to sell everything I own and travel around the country in a trailer, I can do that if I want. Umm... so, I feel... I think it's very liberating to be in middle-age. And... and it's not just the age, it's... I think it's a combination of where I am with my family. So, it's a combination of my son being ready to leave, and having a very stable relationship with my husband, and my age. Maybe it's more the other two things than my age at all, I don't know. [...] And I think that as I continue to get older, umm... I think I'll continue to be happy. [...] So, I have a... I don't feel bad about aging at all. And when I was younger, I thought it would be sad to think that "Oh, my beauty is fading," or "Oh, I'm not as energetic as I used to be," or "I have fewer years to live," and that that would make me sad, but it doesn't make me sad at all. [...] I think that when I was younger, if I was young Debbie sitting here next to me, I would think that I was... umm... a boring, middle-aged person, is how I would judge myself. (laughing) (Debbie, Caucasian, 46 years old)

Also addressing the potentially diverging points of view held by individuals at various ages, Susan explained that one's perspective can change so much as to preclude classifications of experiences as either gains or losses. Even though she felt good about her position in life and did not wish to become any younger, she cautioned that there are no objective references to evaluate the meanings of the transformations associated with aging.

P: I... I think aging is good, I would not wanna go back. And I'm much more interested in going forward than I am in going back. Wouldn't wanna be 20, 30, 40, 50 again. Umm... I like who I am, and I think I'm gonna like who I will be.

I: Do you think that it involves primarily gains or losses?

P: Neither. Neither. I think... I think that there are gains and there are losses, I don't think either one is dominant. I think the paradigm shifts, and that which may be seen as a loss at 20 or 30 becomes a non-event at 50. I think that which you gain at 50 may not be seen as a gain at 20, so I don't... I don't think it's a plus or minus situation. I think it is... it's a shift of perspective. It's a different reality, it's... I'm not who I was then, I'm not who I will be when I'm older, and who I am right now is... is good. I think that who I will be as I get older will be good too – what I was when I was younger was not bad, but looking back at it in hindsight I see how very young I was in many, many venues, so... [...] I just can't see it as a gain or loss situation, it's different. It's just a different reality. (Susan, Caucasian, 56 years old)

In conclusion, whether or not they labeled the changes associated with aging as either gains or losses, the majority of the participants appeared largely satisfied with the new reality that unfolded in their lives. While women talked about a variety of external and internal changes that contributed to their positive feelings, psychological transformations were most frequently mentioned as desirable outcomes of getting older. Among them were the attainment of wisdom, maturity, and life experience; increased feelings of security, competence, confidence, and freedom; and even an improved ability to handle finances. Thus, consistent with previous findings (e.g., Miner-Rubino, Winter, & Stewart, 2004), women reported having developed a clearer sense of who they were as persons and were more self-assured with regard to their abilities than they had been in their younger years. Moreover, lending support to Steinem's (1994) claim that aging can function as a catalyst for women's political radicalization, participants sometimes talked about their political activism and increased willingness to stand up for their beliefs. Symbolically, it is notable that two of the participants (the youngest and the oldest in the sample) proudly recalled their recent experiences of getting their first tattoos, which revealed their view of middle-age as a milestone, rather than the end of a journey. At the same time, even as women recognized a variety of psychological gains associated with aging, a prejudicial equation of older age with negative attributes often transpired through their accounts. More specifically, participants' common insistence that their mind, unlike their body, had not aged or was still "young" exposed their own stereotypes about the types of (negative) transformations that aging presumably entails.

The benefits of aging were not always linked to internal changes, of course. Alterations in life conditions such as having more time as a result of no longer caring for

young children or having retired from a rigid work schedule fostered several women's sense of freedom and control over their own lives. Financial security was also invoked by a number of well-educated, Latina and White professionals as a definite advantage of being older and – in their case – better established in one's career. Thus, even though ethnicity or social class indicators did not generally appear to be related with feelings about aging, the peace of mind brought about by economic stability was, not surprisingly, typically mentioned by the participants with higher educational levels and incomes.

When reflecting upon the possible factors (i.e., valued identities and life circumstances) that may have contributed to their positive feelings about aging, many women talked fondly about the comfort and strength they derived from close family relationships and/or friendships. Other participants pointed to their religious faith as a source of personal strength and guidance. In several cases, a dedication to giving back to others sustained women's enthusiasm for the future. Letting go of expectations such as those related to the maintenance of a youthful appearance or to the traditional marriage ideal also contributed to some participants' feelings of empowerment, thus supporting Greer's (1992) notion that resistance to oppressive standards can be liberating for aging women. Yet, neither of these conditions seemed necessary for psychological growth or contentment with one's place in life. Even women who lacked, for instance, the benefits of desired interpersonal connections sometimes felt good about themselves and confident in their ability to accomplish various goals in the future. As will be discussed in more detail in the next section, despite the possibility of logically connecting valued identities and life situations with particular feelings about aging at an individual level, positive (or

negative) states were not uniquely predicated upon the endorsement of certain identities or the attainment of specific life circumstances.

Chapter 7: Final Considerations

Discussion

The goal of this study was to investigate aging experiences in a diverse sample of women, as well as to explore the possible links between those experiences and women's valued identities and social locations. Given that the existing literature has pointed to specific changes (e.g., loss of sexual value) as responsible for making women's aging difficult in this society, the present research was designed to examine whether the actual meanings of such changes to women influence how they feel about getting older. The expectation was that depending on how a woman defines herself and the identities that she values, transformations such as decreased sexual attractiveness in society's (or men's) eyes may or may not constitute reasons for negative feelings. Further, it was expected that women's valued identities – and, consequently, aging experiences – would vary based on their ethnic and social class background, as suggested by previous writings.

Participants' feelings about aging were typically mixed, as they entailed both concerns related to getting older (e.g., health, physical appearance, discrimination, etc) and satisfaction with some of the (mostly internal) changes associated with aging. While these results are not surprising and reinforce the general notion that women's aging experiences are unlikely to be entirely positive or negative, it is especially revealing to consider those experiences in the context of participants' identities and their significance to women's lives. As an example, women's anxieties about their health deteriorating provide an evocative illustration of the need to understand the particular factors driving such worries, rather than treating them as a unitary experience. Even though virtually all

participants confessed their uneasiness about the potential physical or mental health consequences of getting older, the meanings they assigned to such transformations were far from uniform. As shown in the previous chapter, concerns about illness (and sometimes death) ranged from simple acknowledgements of the body not functioning as reliably as before to feeling overwhelmed by fears of outliving one's husband, or worse, leaving behind a disabled child.

At an individual level, the connections between women's valued identities and circumstances, on the one hand, and their health-related concerns, on the other hand, were often quite obvious. For instance, the participants who worried about losing their husband to death also mentioned their marriage as very important to them, and those afraid of becoming a burden to others tended to be highly invested in their family relationships. At the same time, it is important to note that the endorsement of a particular identity was not necessarily associated with the same types of feelings about aging for all women. Some participants who valued familial connections perceived the family as a safety net whose role was to take care of elderly members. Thus, far from seeing their aging as a potential burden, women such as Margarita felt comforted by the thought of family members being available to care for each other in times of need.

While, in this case, ethnic variations in the meanings associated with close family ties may help to better understand the different perspectives on aging among Latina and Caucasian participants with similar levels of investment in their families, circumstantial and individual factors also appeared to play a significant, and to some extent unpredictable role in shaping feelings about aging. Kerry, the Caucasian woman who had adopted her husband's values concerning close family bonds was eager to help her

elderly mother and could not even conceive of not taking care of her if she were to need more assistance. As a younger family member, Kerry was ready to accept full responsibility for the well-being of the older generation, in the same way that Margarita's extended family members presumably were. Yet, unlike in the case of Margarita, the thought of herself someday becoming dependent on her children seemed unbearable. Therefore, as these examples suggest, generalizations about the role of identities (or other potentially related factors such as ethnicity or social class) in shaping aging experiences need to be made with caution, as they always operate within particular contexts and in conjunction with various idiosyncratic influences.

Keeping in mind these caveats, the following overview is intended to situate women's feelings about aging, which have been presented in detail elsewhere, in the larger context of their valued identities and social location. Besides health issues, which were almost universally recognized as an unavoidable component of getting older, a large portion of the participants also mentioned changes in physical appearance as an undesirable hallmark of aging. This finding is consistent with the originally formulated expectation that, given this society's Western cultural values that emphasize youth and beauty, many women are likely to be bothered by what is commonly thought of as the deterioration of their looks.

Further, it was expected that the extent to which women are affected by exterior changes is dependent upon their valued identities and whether or not the attainment or maintenance of those identities requires them to project a youthful appearance. While this expectation was discussed in relation to a range of identities including work and other areas of life, relationships with men were believed to be particularly susceptible to the

impact of physical aging because of the purported importance of women's youth for heterosexual desirability. More specifically, it was expected that the participants who are firmly grounded in relationships such as long-term marriages and those for whom heterosexual partnerships are not a major component of their identity would be less concerned about physical changes than the women who desire a relationship with a man and do not currently have one, or those who feel insecure in their current relationships.

In general, the results seemed to confirm the expected connections between valued identities and feelings about changes in physical appearance. The women who felt secure in their (mostly heterosexual) close relationships thought that physical aging was largely inconsequential in terms of their identities as wives or partners, and tended to describe it as a simple annoyance rather than as devastating. For example, Margarita and Jennifer complained, in a laughing manner, about the alteration of their looks, yet also noted that it did not threaten their stable marriages and had no profound meanings for them. Moreover, some happily married participants such as Susan or Debbie evaluated the transformation of their looks as completely neutral or even positive.

A similar pattern emerged among most of the participants who were not highly invested in their existing couple relationships, as well as those that did not have an intimate partner or the desire to get one. Thus, women such as Olivia, Toni, and Teresa, who felt fairly distant from their (sometimes abusive) husbands, did not seem to even consider the impact of physical appearance on their marriage. Of the few participants who were single and not seeking a relationship, Helen's nonchalance regarding her looks appeared particularly remarkable. As someone who preferred solitary activities to socializing and had no intention of ever getting involved with a man again, she was not

only comfortable with her older appearance, but actually derived pleasure from obvious and commonly denigrated changes such as tooth loss.

On the other hand, there was one participant who felt somewhat insecure in her relationship and, as predicted, worried about the potential consequences of looking older. For sixty year-old Elizabeth, who had recently developed a connection with a younger partner, anxieties related to the ten-year age difference led to considering the possibility of plastic surgery with the stated purpose of appearing younger for the sake of that relationship. This example of insecurity associated with concerns about physical appearance, along with the previously mentioned cases of women who were either comfortable in or indifferent about relationships with men and were not seriously bothered by their changing looks, lend credibility to the presumed connections between investment in heterosexual relationships and their perceived security, on the one hand, and concerns about exterior aging, on the other hand.

However, there were also several exceptions that contradicted the initial expectations. Most notably, Norma and Sandra, two highly educated professional immigrants in their mid-fifties, were single at the time of the interview and hoped to find a male partner in the future, but did not think of physical aging as a significant obstacle. Even though Norma resented having to upgrade her appearance to be noticed by higher status men and Sandra had some concerns about her older body, neither of them viewed aging per se as hindering their pursuits. In fact, both women felt that they were in a better position than ever before to fully enjoy a romantic connection. While not necessarily conclusive given the very small number of participants in this situation and the similarity of their backgrounds, such unanticipated findings raise questions about the ways in which

the double standard of aging (Sontag, 1992/1997) operates today in different contexts and how it is perceived by women of various ethnicities and social class standings.

Assuming that at least some (categories of) women no longer tend to view aging as a significant impediment to seeking male partners in middle-age and beyond, the previously stated conclusions regarding the role of security in romantic relationships or lack of interest in such relationships as factors that protect women against devastating concerns about an aging appearance may also not be warranted. In other words, if women in general are not as terrified of looking older as much of the previous literature suggests (e.g., Harris, 1975; Melamed, 1983; Hurd Clarke, 2011), then participants' valued identities and, for the women who are highly invested in heterosexual connections, their relationship status or relationship stability may also not be as impactful as hypothesized.

In addition, it needs to be reiterated that the interrelations between valued identities and feelings about physical appearance were sometimes more elusive than the above classification might suggest. Stephanie, for instance, was married to a much younger man on whom she depended financially, and also strongly resented the aging of her body and appearance. Yet, contrary to the expectation that women who see the potential for being abandoned by a man, particularly when faced with economic uncertainties as she was, would be especially concerned about appearance out of fear of losing his support, Stephanie's frustration with menopause and wrinkles, and her longing for plastic surgery (which she could not afford) did not stem from questioning her adequacy in that marriage or in heterosexual relationships in general. Thus, not only was she unconcerned about whether or not her husband, who was not the "love of [her] life," would at some point leave her for a younger woman, but she also insisted that she had no

interest in getting involved with a man again – even though she believed that finding one would not be difficult. Rather than counting on a male partner to save her from poverty or even homelessness, Stephanie trusted other people such as her daughter and friends to help her in times of need.

Besides (potential) health problems and changes in physical appearance, concerns about the prejudice and discrimination faced by older people were also frequently mentioned by the women in this sample. The complaints of several educated participants resembled the academic discourse on youth-oriented cultural standards that do not allow women in this society to age comfortably, while others offered specific descriptions of the different types of discriminatory behaviors that they had encountered or were afraid of being subjected to.

Some women expressed consternation at the lack of respect commonly shown to older people, especially by young individuals and children. Even though most of these (still middle-aged) participants had not yet experienced such disrespect themselves, they were worried about soon joining the ranks of those whom they noticed being poorly treated. Most frequently, lack of respect was depicted as a problem pertaining to the public sphere, rather than as something affecting women's private lives. For example, Kimberly and Susan talked extensively about the age-based discrimination that they had witnessed in the volunteering arena or in places such as stores and restaurants. While such behaviors did not necessarily threaten participants' most central identities, they nevertheless placed significant constraints on some of the activities that they valued. Susan, for instance, had decided not to travel to certain cities simply to avoid going unnoticed as a customer, while Kimberly, who had been volunteering for a long time and

looked forward to continuing to do that in the future, was unsure about how much her contribution would be appreciated as she gets older.

Unlike the Caucasian women who brought up lack of respect for older people in encounters with strangers, Teresa, a Latina participant who cared deeply about her family, was afraid of losing the respect of her own grandchildren as they adopt the values of this society. Even though it would be inappropriate to make any generalizations based on her unique case, it is worth noting that Teresa's feelings were consistent with previous findings (Beyene, Becker, & Mayen, 2002) regarding the importance placed by middle-aged and older Latino/a immigrants on the amount of support and respect received from their families, especially from the younger generations.

Discrimination on the job market was another manifestation of age-based prejudice that some of the participants feared or had already encountered. For a few women who were highly invested in their current or prospective career and saw it as a significant component of their present or future identity, thoughts about being perceived as incompetent or simply too old to be hired were particularly disturbing. Jennifer, for example, loved going to college and was very passionate about continuing with graduate school and eventually switching to a more meaningful profession, but the possibility of rejection as a result of being in her mid-forties tampered her enthusiasm. A small number of career-oriented participants with advanced degrees similarly felt that professional success is harder to obtain later in life, or that a thriving profession can be severely disrupted by job loss at an age when individuals become increasingly unemployable. Echoing these sentiments, even women who no longer defined themselves through

having a job or making money sometimes mentioned age as a (potential) disadvantage when looking for work.

Interestingly, participants' concerns about job discrimination were not an outcome of working in professions that require youthful looks, as had been hypothesized. Rather, the women in this sample who worried about the effects of aging on their careers invoked factors such as loss of (professional) respect as women get older, employers' unwillingness to pay for people's experience, or hesitation to take on someone who nears retirement age.

At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that there were a considerable number of Latina and White professionals who not only felt accomplished in their careers, but also viewed their accumulated work and life experiences as an advantage for future pursuits. Thus, whether they were hoping to continue growing in their current field or switching to a different path, women such as Debbie, Linda, Norma, and Sandra were confident in their abilities and in prospective employers' appreciation of their past achievements. In general, with the exception of Peggy, who feared budget cuts and was not optimistic about being able to find another job at her age, the participants who were invested in their careers and had already achieved a certain level of professional success did not think of getting older as hindering their opportunities.

Finally, a couple of interviewees mentioned medical practitioners' patronizing attitudes as yet another form of prejudice against middle-aged women. Even though, as noted earlier, most participants were well-aware of the potential health decline associated with getting older, the excessive medicalization of women's aging, which has been extensively written about in the feminist literature (e.g., Greer, 1992; Jones, 1994) was

not without emotional consequences for the participants who encountered and noticed it in their interactions with health care providers.

A third category of concerns about the future, in addition to health, appearance, and discrimination was related to financial safety. Given the economic situation of the country at the time of the interviews and the pervasiveness of threats about (or the reality of) budget cuts to various sectors, it is perhaps not surprising that the participants who felt unsure about their finances had a wide range of educational and income levels, from unemployed women with a high school degree to highly educated and well-paid professionals. In some cases, the participants linked their actual or feared inability to find employment again following job loss with age-based discrimination, which they thought placed middle-aged women in a particularly vulnerable position. Importantly, even though economic security represented a significant concern for a number of women in this sample, the preoccupation with continuing to meet their needs as they age is not to be mistaken for greed or an appetite for self-indulgence and the accumulation of resources. In fact, some participants such as Stephanie relayed their financial worries even as they noted the diminished importance of material things in their lives, compared to their younger years.

On the other hand, for most of the professionals who felt successful in their previous or present careers (including Debbie, Sarah, and Margarita), middle-age was the time to reap the benefits of their earlier efforts by enjoying not only economic freedom, but also an increased confidence in themselves and their ability to thrive in work environments. Thus, one of the positive outcomes that the participants attributed to aging seemed directly related to their educational level and the types of positions they held.

Whereas not all women employed in prestigious careers experienced a high level of comfort and security, the participants who talked about the accumulated earnings and other advantages stemming from their jobs had earned at least a bachelor's degree and worked in professional fields.

Economic gains were not the most frequently mentioned benefits of aging, and neither did they appear to be the most significant. Instead, an overwhelming majority of the participants invoked a variety of psychological gains as compensating for or even surpassing in importance any losses (e.g., physical, appearance-related, etc) that they had also noticed. In addition, there were a few women such as Jennifer who thought of aging as a primarily negative experience, yet still acknowledged some favorable consequences associated with it – in her case, “wisdom” and “not being naïve.”

Participants' reports of favorable psychological developments are not entirely surprising, given that previous studies (e.g., Miner-Rubino, Winter, & Stewart, 2004) have also noted such gains. However, the relative importance of internal growth compared to other, less desirable outcomes was unexpected given the feminist literature on women's aging (e.g., Cruikshank, 2003; Hurd Clarke, 2011; Melamed, 1983), which has often depicted this process as overwhelmingly difficult. In those writings, the fading of sexual attractiveness was typically decried as the major reason for women's discontent about growing older. Given that changes in physical appearance, although usually unwelcome, were generally not thought of as very serious concerns by the women in this study, it is possible that psychological gains emerged as a predominant theme, at least in part, because they were not counterbalanced by a strong preoccupation with the evolution of exterior looks. In other words, not attributing great significance to the alteration of

their appearance may have allowed the participants to focus on the internal (and more desirable) transformations that they had experienced.

With regard to some of the causes of participants' relative indifference toward the physical signs of getting older, their perceptions of both external and internal changes seemed related to the abandonment of earlier values that not only commanded a youthful appearance, but also linked their worth to the achievement of rigidly defined social expectations. The themes of pleasing others by looking or acting a certain way and the traditional marriage ideal, as values that many women no longer subscribed to, informed their present and projected identities, as well as the meanings attached to those identities. For example, Linda's rejection of a more traditional "dream of what a perfect life is" enabled her to live comfortably as a single mother following her two divorces and to fully appreciate the experience and skills that she would bring to her future career, in which she was highly invested. While she was still open to the possibility of romance in the future, the shift from envisaging a traditional married life to focusing on her education and career allowed Linda to feel positively about aging rather than assessing her life circumstances as an indication of having failed, as it might have appeared in light of her previous values and corresponding identities.

The relinquishment of earlier values and identities did not only appear to benefit women who switched (at least temporarily) from heterosexual to other types of pursuits, however. Norma and Sandra, who were both divorced, had also left behind a high investment in projecting a beautiful appearance or traditional views on marriage, respectively. Yet, their future dreams were built around finding romantic connections with men, and neither of them thought of her physical appearance as precluding such

aspirations. Instead, Norma invoked internal growth and Sandra talked about her freedom from childrearing as offering enhanced opportunities for developing meaningful couple relationships.

Thus, even though the abandonment of constraining values may have contributed to women's mostly positive feelings about aging, as illustrated in the above examples, the changes in their values and identities did not necessarily entail leaving behind their sense of femininity and their view of themselves as sexual beings. Instead, it seemed that participants' actual or projected identities as wives or partners deepened to accommodate a better articulated and more personalized notion of who they are, as opposed to what they should be according to mainstream societal discourses.

This transformative process, while similar on the surface with the inward retreat and flight from socially imposed expectations of womanhood described by Greer (1992), is nevertheless radically different in its essence. Whereas Greer's detachment from femininity emerged as a response to being rendered unfeminine and invisible by society, many women in this study seemed to build on their internal journeys to achieve a fuller and more complex understanding of what it means to be a woman and what she can offer in various domains of life, including couple relationships. Although it is possible that changes in physical appearance and no longer being thought of as "pretty" have prompted or facilitated the participants' focus on inside growth, the shift in their perspectives did not seem to be a reaction to social or sexual invisibility. Thus, besides fondly witnessing their internal growth, many of the women in this study expected to be appreciated by men (whether husbands or potential partners) for those same characteristics that they valued in themselves.

In addition to the abandonment of oppressive societal standards, some of the participants' current and projected identities also seemed to contribute significantly to their positive aging experiences. Confirming previous expectations, a high investment in long-term marriages or partnerships generally enhanced women's feelings of security and comfort, as eloquently explained by Sarah and Debbie. According to these and other women, being known on a profound level and accepted unconditionally, as well as aging together with another person are powerful in cementing self-acceptance and confidence. At the same time, while acknowledging such significant, long-term relationships as a major source of support for those participating in them, it needs to be kept in mind that their absence did not necessarily result in self-doubt or loss of confidence in one's abilities or heterosexual desirability.

Giving to others, whether in the form of volunteering, caring for family members, or working in professions such as nursing represented highly meaningful activities to a majority of the participants. Because women's current and projected identities frequently entailed helping others in various ways, having the opportunity to do so at present and especially in the future appeared to reassure many of them of their continued ability to offer a valuable contribution. For example, fifty-one year-old Sarah complained about having internalized the perception of retirement as a marker of losing one's value to society. However, she was actively searching for expanding the scope of her social involvement as she ages and eventually retires, and thought that providing support to younger and older women was one important way in which she could promote mutual support and understanding between the different generations.

Even though the importance and benefits of volunteering to older women have been well documented in previous research (McIntosh & Danigelis, 1995; Onyx & Warburton, 2003; Warburton & McLaughlin, 2006) it was interesting to note the range of giving activities invoked by the women in this study, as well as the ethnic patterns in the types of help that the participants were (looking forward to) offering to others. Whereas the Caucasian participants tended to focus on volunteering in its classic sense of unpaid public service, the Latina women seemed more inclined to give to their own families, especially by helping raise their grandchildren. Of course, as with any generalizations, there were individual cases that deviated from these trends. Most notably, Elizabeth, a Los Angeles-born Latina woman, was strongly invested in her volunteering and charity work within a church context, and had built her entire existence around that faith mission.

Whether in association with volunteering and going to church or as a personal journey, religion and spirituality were also major components of many participants' identities. Although religion was more frequently invoked by ethnic minority women as a central identity, it was fairly common for both White and Latina participants to derive a sense of reassurance and connectedness from their faith that appeared to provide direction for the future and soothe concerns about aging. In the most extreme cases, religious faith had supported women like Emily or Kimberly through major life difficulties such as the death of a child or raising a disabled child, and continued to comfort them as they contemplated their own aging and death. On the other hand, even for women with less dramatic predicaments such as Sarah, a longstanding relationship with God, who she believed had never forsaken her, was said to promote increased confidence in herself and the future.

Friendships, especially with other women, had also been expected to feature prominently among women's identities and to protect them against aging concerns. Indeed, replicating previous findings regarding the centrality and protective role of (particularly long-term) friendships in women's lives (e.g., Jerrome, 1981; Rubin, 1985; Stevens, 2001), many participants of both ethnicities talked about their female friends as major sources of emotional and practical support, and sometimes regarded them as no less important than familial ties. Moreover, several women described their longstanding friendships as a crucial support system to accompany them during the process of aging, whether as an addition to or as a replacement for couple relationships. Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the bleakest portrayals of aging belonged to Toni, whose lack of a close connection with her husband and friends left her especially vulnerable to the (negative) effects of aging on her career, the only area in which she was truly invested.

In brief, the abandonment of oppressive norms and values, as well as many of the participants' current and projected identities, appeared to be linked with (and were often invoked by the participants as responsible for) their positive feelings about aging. Interestingly, even though motherhood was mentioned by a large number of Caucasian and Latina women alike as a very important, if not the most important identity, the connections between a high investment in motherhood and favorable aging experiences seemed less clear. If anything, disengagement from the role of mother as a result of grown-up children leaving the home or becoming more independent was experienced as a liberating outcome associated with middle-age, even when the mother identity continued to define the women beyond that transition.

Limitations

The data presented and discussed thus far need to be considered in conjunction with the limitations inherent to this type of research. First of all, given the qualitative nature of the present study and the purposeful, non-probability sampling of the participants, the results are not generalizable beyond this sample. Thus, even though all of the women interviewed for this project resided in the Reno area, their aging experiences do not necessarily represent the views of local middle-aged women in general. Moreover, while the participants had different ethnic backgrounds, the responses of the Caucasian and Latina women cannot be assumed to stand for and accurately reflect the aging experiences of their respective ethnic groups. Similarly, having interviewed women with a range of educational levels, occupations, and income categories does not allow for wide generalizations of the findings in relation to those categories. Therefore, the current results are best suited to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' aging experiences and how they are linked with important identities and background factors among the women in this sample, rather than to definitively describe how aging is experienced by certain populations or categories of women.

Further, although the final sample was fairly diverse and by no means limited to White, middle-class women (as is often the case in social research), the most serious methodological challenge involved the inability to recruit African American volunteers. While the possible causes of this outcome have been discussed extensively in the methodology chapter, it nevertheless needs to be acknowledged that those parts of the research questions and expectations that referred specifically to Black women have remained unanswered. Consequently, even though a relatively large portion of the

literature review has been devoted to discussing previous writings about African American women and speculating about how their aging experiences might differ from those of Caucasian women, the present study adds no empirical data with regard to this racial group. A related, but less serious problem was the difficulty of recruiting Latina women, and their smaller number comparative to the Caucasian participants constitutes another limitation of the study.

The methods used to recruit participants are also likely to have influenced the results in significant ways. For example, posting recruitment flyers on the university campus led to the immediate enrollment of a considerable number of middle-aged college students. Although, as stated before, the sample was not meant to represent the general population and therefore overrepresentation of certain groups is not in itself problematic, interviewing several participants who shared the non-traditional college student experience may have resulted in overlooking other types of experiences that could have emerged from a more diverse sample. In addition, advertising the study to large audiences and relying on interested women to self-select for participation may have resulted in a group of volunteers whose feelings about aging, whether positive or negative, tend to be more extreme than those of the general population.

Moving beyond considerations about the study sample, it is important to recognize that the interviews were not exchanges designed to elicit supposedly objective information, but rather an attempt to understand how women make sense of their aging. As such, the participants were not simply communicating their thoughts, feelings, and identities, but actively constructing life stories in response to the questions posed by the interviewer (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). In this sense, one obvious limitation of studies

that ask retrospective questions is the fact that participants' recollections of past experiences are necessarily filtered through their present worldviews.

In the context of this research, it is impossible to determine whether women's depictions of their younger years would have coincided with their previous views of themselves, had they been recorded at an earlier point. For example, even though several participants complained about having been constrained in the past by the traditional marriage ideal or by concerns about looking attractive and being nice to others, this study cannot offer insights about how they actually felt at that time. While such distortions may happen either consciously or subconsciously whenever people reconstruct their biographies, the women in this study may have been especially prone to emphasize the problems of youth to help create, by contrast, a more favorable image of their current life. Such recreations of the past, if they occurred, were not necessarily motivated (solely) by participants' desire to cast themselves in a positive light to impress the interviewer. Instead of engaging in deliberate strategies to mislead the researcher, the women in this study could have just as well constructed certain types of life narratives "for themselves," in ways that allowed them to feel more positively about being older (Richardson, Stewart, & Simmonds, 1979, p. 299).

While the reconstruction of biography is a theoretically important limitation, it can also be argued that women's current perspectives on their past, present, and future, and not their correctness, are the most relevant for understanding aging experiences. Thus, the accuracy of participants' accounts may be less significant than describing how women make sense of their reality in middle-age, especially if their reconstructions of the

past are driven primarily by internal motivations, rather than by self-presentation demands.

At the same time, various interviewer characteristics (e.g., age, personality, etc) and how she was perceived by different participants may have influenced the construction of their responses in less innocuous ways. Even though all of the interviews were conducted by the same researcher and it is difficult to determine the extent of her impact on women's stories, it is possible that the findings are partially reflective of such personal dynamics. For example, some feminist authors have noted the tensions that can emerge between different generations of women as a result of widespread anxieties about aging (Cruikshank, 2003). More specifically, it has been argued that younger women may be inclined to distance themselves from their older peers, who embody the image of what they are afraid of someday becoming. Given that the researcher was in her thirties and younger than all of the participants (with the age difference being more obvious in some cases than in others), it is conceivable that some of the interviewees may have attempted to present aging in a more favorable light in order to reduce the interviewer's presumed fears of or negative stereotypes about getting older. However, it is also noteworthy that several women came to the interview with a clear intention to share specific experiences and feelings, which they believed would be relevant for a study on women's aging. Therefore, it seems likely that at least some of the participants perceived this research project as an opportunity to talk about experiences that already preoccupied them and to communicate stories that had largely been constructed prior to the interview, rather than generated in response to the researcher's questions and shaped by her particularities.

To summarize this section, the qualitative data that form the basis for the present research provide an in-depth understanding of aging experiences and valued identities among the interviewed women, and are not generalizable beyond this sample. In addition, the results need to be interpreted with caution in light of potential influences on participants' responses, several of which have been outlined above.

Conclusions and Future Directions

The present study was designed to investigate middle-aged women's aging experiences and some of the factors that were deemed most likely to influence those experiences. Based on the previous literature, it was expected that women's diminishing heterosexual attractiveness was largely responsible for their feelings of loss as they age, and that such feelings were particularly salient among women who valued heterosexual relationships but had difficulties maintaining or developing them as a result of being rendered asexual or invisible by society. Further, given the White, middle-class bias of most writings on women's aging and the fact that heterosexual partnerships have been found to be more central to such women than to ethnic minority women such as Latinas, differences in the importance of male-oriented identities were expected to lead to diverging aging experiences. While the literature review, as well as the research questions and expectations, were more comprehensive and nuanced than the above summary, it is nevertheless fair to acknowledge these as the most fundamental premises upon which the research was built.

Interestingly however, these basic assumptions have been, to a large extent, contradicted by the empirical data. First of all, even though there were some differences with regard to Caucasian and Latina participants' valued identities, their investment in

heterosexual relationships did not appear to differ. Even more surprisingly, the vast majority of the women did not bring up or were not seriously bothered by loss of sexual value as an age-related concern, regardless of their important identities, background characteristics, or life circumstances. Thus, even though the gains associated with aging were often juxtaposed against various concerns about issues such as illness or discrimination on the job market, the participants' responses clearly departed from the expectation that changes in physical appearance and their implications for heterosexual attractiveness would be perceived catastrophically, at least by some of the women.

Although there is no strong evidence in the academic literature for completely discounting the double standard of aging, which has been confirmed in a fairly large number of studies that examined gender-based age preferences in heterosexual relationships (e.g., Buss, 2006; Hayes, 1995; Silverthorne & Quinsey, 2000) or evaluations of younger versus older women (e.g., Perlini, Bertolissi, & Lind, 1999; Deutsch, Zalenski, & Clark, 2006), there are writings that seem to contradict its continued potency. For example, Naomi Wolf, the famous author of "The Beauty Myth" and now an upper-class divorcee in her late forties, has recently published a media article extolling her life stage as one in which, contrary to earlier expectations, she feels exceedingly attractive as an accomplished, charismatic, and still beautiful woman (Wolf, 2011, May 27). Moreover, while one of the participants (Elizabeth) exemplified a woman whose relational insecurity generated anxiety about looking older, her doubts were related to her being ten years older than her recently found partner, which in itself suggests a loosening of the well-documented double standard of aging, according to which women are to be younger than their male partners. Consequently, one possible

direction for future studies would be to further explore the manifestations of the double standard of aging, in order to better understand in what ways and to what extent it still operates today.

At the same time, considering the differences between the current outcomes and other, much less positive reports regarding women's aging experiences – including Hurd Clarke's (2011) relatively recent qualitative studies on middle-aged and elderly women from Canada – it might be useful to replicate this research in other geographic areas, to get a better sense of the degree to which the present data represent the views of middle-aged women beyond this sample.

Finally, the present results may also be a reflection of the methodological approach chosen for this study. Instead of simply asking the participants how they felt about aging or about specific age-related changes, an effort was made to arrive at an in-depth understanding of what aging meant in the context of each woman's life. In this sense, the valued identities framework that guided the data collection and analysis likely encouraged the participants to think about the significance of their aging in a holistic fashion, rather than focusing on their feelings and experiences in a fragmented way. Moreover, this framework enabled a nuanced examination of women's feelings about aging, avoiding their simplistic categorization as either positive or negative. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies also incorporate important identities as part of the investigation of women's aging experiences.

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Appendix 1. Demographic Background

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Education	Household Income Category	Current or Most Recent Occupation
Linda	44	White/Caucasian	Some college but no degree	Under \$15,000	Student, former Medical assistant
Jennifer	43	White/Caucasian	Some college but no degree	\$50,000-\$74,999	Student, Paralegal
Sarah	51	White/Caucasian	Four-year college degree	\$75,000-\$99,999	Nurse
Anne	65	White/Caucasian	Post-graduate degree	\$50,000-\$74,999	Retired, former Shift supervisor
Elizabeth	60	Latina/Hispanic	Some college but no degree	Under \$15,000	Marketing, former Small business owner
Peggy	59	White/Caucasian	Post-graduate degree	\$75,000-\$99,999	Professor
Kerry	49	White/Caucasian	Four-year college degree	\$35,000-\$49,999	Data management analyst
Debbie	46	White/Caucasian	Four-year college degree	\$100,000-\$199,999	Student, former Biologist
Toni	58	White/Caucasian	Post-graduate degree	\$25,000-\$34,999	Counselor
Susan	56	White/Caucasian	Post-graduate degree	\$200,000 and over	Retired, Chef
Olivia	48	Latina/Hispanic	Some high school but no diploma	\$50,000-\$74,999	Salesperson
Kimberly	63	White/Caucasian	Some college but no degree	\$75,000-\$99,999	Retired, former Administrative secretary
Helen	60	White/Caucasian	Associates degree	\$35,000-\$49,999	Retired, Committee secretary
Lynette	63	White/Caucasian	High school diploma or GED	\$35,000-\$49,999	Retired, former Wedding chapel manager
Amy	40	White/Caucasian	Some college but no degree	\$35,000-\$49,999	Office administrator
Margarita	51	Latina/Hispanic	Four-year college degree	\$35,000-\$49,999	Family resource specialist
Stephanie	51	White/Caucasian	High school diploma or GED	\$25,000-\$34,999	Customer representative
Emily	55	Latina/Hispanic	Some college but no degree	\$50,000-\$74,999	Claim associate
Sandra	54	Latina/Hispanic	Post-graduate degree	\$50,000-\$74,999	Management analyst
Teresa	64	Latina/Hispanic	High school diploma or GED	\$25,000-\$34,999	Administrator
Norma	54	Latina/Hispanic	Post-graduate degree	\$50,000-\$74,999	Statistician

Appendix 2. Relationship and Family Situation

Pseudonym	Relationship Status	Has Children	Has Grandchildren	Number of Siblings	Family of Origin Social Class
Linda	Single and not seeing anyone, Divorced	Yes	No	2	Upper middle-class
Jennifer	Remarried	Yes	No	7	Working-class
Sarah	In first marriage	Yes	No	3	Upper middle-class
Anne	Living with a partner	No	No	2	Working-class
Elizabeth	In a relationship but not living together, Divorced	Yes	No	1	Working-class
Peggy	Single and not seeing anyone	No	No	1	Working-class
Kerry	In first marriage	Yes	No	5	Working-class
Debbie	In first marriage	Yes	No	5	Working-class
Toni	In first marriage	No	No	2	Working-class
Susan	Remarried	Yes	No	0	Upper middle-class
Olivia	In first marriage	Yes	No	10	Working-class
Kimberly	In first marriage	Yes	No	2	Middle-class
Helen	Divorced	Yes	No	2	Middle-class
Lynette	Living with a partner, Divorced	Yes	Yes	4	Middle-class
Amy	Living with a partner	No	No	0	Working-class
Margarita	In first marriage	Yes	No	7	Working-class
Stephanie	Remarried	Yes	Yes	3	Middle-class
Emily	In first marriage	Yes	No	4	Middle-class
Sandra	Single and not seeing anyone, Divorced	Yes	No	5	Working-class
Teresa	In first marriage	Yes	Yes	7	Working-class
Norma	Divorced	Yes	No	5	Working-class

Appendix 3. Religion, Community and Political Activities

Pseudonym	Religiosity	Denomination	Engaged in Community Activities	Participates in Political Activities
Linda	Not religious at all	-	Yes	Yes
Jennifer	Somewhat religious	Christian, Non-denominational	No	No
Sarah	Very religious	Christian, Non-denominational	Yes	No
Anne	Somewhat religious	-	Yes	Yes
Elizabeth	Very religious	-	No	No
Peggy	Somewhat religious	-	Yes	Yes
Kerry	Not religious at all	Muslim	Yes	Yes
Debbie	Not religious at all	-	Yes	No
Toni	Somewhat spiritual	-	Yes	Yes
Susan	Very religious	Jewish	Yes	Yes
Olivia	Somewhat religious	Jehovah Witness	Yes	No
Kimberly	Very religious	Born Again, Saved and Sanctified, Non-denominational	Yes	No
Helen	Not religious at all	-	No	Yes
Lynette	Very religious	Non-denominational	No	No
Amy	Somewhat religious	-	Yes	Yes
Margarita	Somewhat religious	Catholic	No	No
Stephanie	Somewhat religious	-	No	Yes
Emily	Very religious	Seventh Day Adventist	Yes	No
Sandra	Not religious at all	-	No	No
Teresa	Very religious	Catholic	Yes	No
Norma	Somewhat religious	-	Yes	No

Appendix 4. Screening Script

Hello, this is Ada with the study about women and aging. Are you calling in regards to this study?

[If yes]: OK. As you probably know already, I am conducting research on how different women experience aging, and I'm interested in talking to women between the ages of 40 and 65. Would you be interested in participating?

[If yes]: Great. I just need to ask you a few quick questions before we can talk more about the study, just to make sure that you are eligible to participate. Is that OK with you?

[If potential participant agrees to be questioned]:

First, could you tell me what age you are?

How about your race or ethnicity? What racial or ethnic group do you identify with?

What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

And finally, could you tell me what your occupation is? If you are not currently employed, do you have a usual occupation?

[If potential participant does not meet the criteria for inclusion in the study]: Well, I already have enough women in the study who are in your age group, so I guess I can't use your participation, but thanks so much.

[If potential participant meets criteria for inclusion in the study]: OK, it looks like you meet all of the criteria for participating in this study. Would you like to know more about the study at this point, or should we go ahead and schedule a time and place to meet for the interview?

[If potential participant agrees to schedule a time and place for the interview, the student investigator will ask for her first name and contact information – either phone number or email.]

Appendix 5. Questionnaire

Please take a few moments to answer the following questions about yourself and your background before we begin the interview.

In what year were you born? 19__

With what race or ethnicity do you identify?

Black/African American

Latina/Hispanic

White/Caucasian

Other

What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

Primary school

Some high school but no diploma

High school diploma or GED

Some college but no degree

Associates degree

Four-year college degree

Post-graduate degree

Are you currently working for pay?

Yes No

If yes, please provide your job title _____

If not, please provide your most recent job title

Please describe your current or most recent work duties (briefly)

What is your annual household income category?

- Under \$15,000
- \$15,000 - \$24,999
- \$25,000 - \$34,999
- \$35,000 - \$49,999
- \$50,000 - \$74,999
- \$75,000 - \$99,999
- \$100,000 - \$199,999
- \$200,000 and over

Where were you born?

Name of the city or town _____
State (if in the U.S.) _____
Country _____

What is the highest level of education that your *mother* completed?

- Primary school
- Some high school but no diploma
- High school diploma or GED
- Some college but no degree
- Associates degree
- Four-year college degree
- Post-graduate degree
- Don't know

Did your mother work for pay outside the home when you were growing up?

Yes No

If yes, what was her usual occupation? _____

Please describe her duties (briefly)

What is the highest level of education that your *father* completed?

- Primary school
 Some high school but no diploma
 High school diploma or GED
 Some college but no degree
 Associates degree
 Four-year college degree
 Post-graduate degree
 Don't know

Did your father work for pay outside the home when you were growing up?

- Yes No

If yes, what was his usual occupation? _____

Please describe his duties (briefly)

Who did you live with the most as a child? (Check all that apply):

- Both parents
 One parent
 Stepparent(s)
 Grandparent(s)
 Other, please specify: _____

Do you have any brothers or sisters? Yes No

If yes, please indicate how many: Brothers Sisters

What social class would you say your family of origin was?

- Working-class
 Middle-class
 Upper middle-class

What is your marital/relationship status? (Please check ALL THAT APPLY)

- Single and not seeing anyone
 Dating but not in a serious relationship
 In a relationship but not living together
 Living with a partner
 Engaged to be married
 In my first marriage
 Remarried
 Separated
 Divorced
 Widowed

Do you have any children or stepchildren? Yes No

If yes, do any of them still live with you? Yes No

Do you have any grandchildren? Yes No

If yes, do any of them live with you? Yes No

How religious do you see yourself?

0 Not religious at all 1 Somewhat religious 2 Very religious

If you checked “Somewhat religious” or “Very religious,” what makes you a religious person? (Check all that apply):

- Religious/Spiritual beliefs
 Religious practices such as praying, fasting, or attending church
 Faith community involvement such as volunteering
 Other, please specify: _____

If you attend religious services or are involved with a faith community, what is the denomination?

Are you engaged in any activities within your community? ___ Yes ___
No

If yes, what are those?

Do you participate in any political activities? ___ Yes ___ No

If yes, what are those?

Would you consider yourself a feminist or not? ___ Yes ___ No

Why is that?

Appendix 6. Interview Guide

Important identities – present

Now that you have filled out this brief questionnaire, I would like to talk to you about the things in your life that YOU consider to be really important.

Let's start with your family. Is the fact that you are (e.g., a mother, divorced, a stepdaughter, etc) really important for how you see yourself as a person? Which of these identities (what some people call roles) are really significant to you? Let's talk more about these.

[For each identity mentioned as important, probe to find out more about the nature of the identity and what it means for the participant.]

Example:

If “in a relationship” is an important identity:

How would you describe the quality of your relationship with your partner? How do you get along, how supportive is he/she?

What does this relationship really mean to you – is it financial security, companionship, being seen a certain way, or something else?

If “divorced” is an important identity:

What does it mean to you to be a divorced woman? How does it affect the way you see yourself or are seen by others?

If “grandmother” is an important identity:

How would you describe your relationship with your grandchildren? How often do you see or talk to them? What do your grandchildren mean to you? How does being a grandmother make you feel about yourself?

In addition to what we have we have talked about, are there any identities (or roles) that are really important to you? Think about aspects of life you really value and how they define who you are.

[If participant does not seem to understand the question or cannot think of anything that matters to them, the following statement will serve as a probe:]

For some people things like work, or religion, or friends are really important parts of who they are, whereas others do not find these important at all. Everyone is different. In your case, what parts of your life are really meaningful or important?

Are there any things that you truly value, even if you might not actually have them in your life?

Changes in identities – past and future

Have these identities that we have just talked about always been so important to you? [For example: Has being a religious person always been a crucial part of your identity?]

If not, why do you think they became important?

Are there any identities that used to be very important to you and are not anymore? When did that change and in what ways?

When you think about the future, what do you think will matter to you most?

Feelings about aging

Now let's talk more specifically about aging, which is the focus of this research, as you know.

When you think about your own aging, how do you feel about it?

Do you see aging as something that involves primarily gains or losses?

Please explain.

Maintenance or achievement of important identities

Now I'd like you to think about aging in the context of the identities that you mentioned as important to you. [For example: You mentioned that being a mother and having close friends is really important to you.]

Do you think that your feelings about aging might be influenced by the identities that are important to you? [For example, do you think that your mostly positive feelings about aging might be influenced by the fact that you are so invested in motherhood and in close friendships?]

What impact do you think those identities or roles you value have on how you experience aging?

Do you see aging as helpful or hurtful in maintaining or achieving the identities that are important to you? As you age, will it get easier or harder for you to have the identities that you value?

For some women, things like close relationships, work or friendships seem to promote a more positive experience of aging, whereas for others they do not. In your case, would you say that these things have any influence on how you feel about your aging?

Can you think of any other aspects of your life that might influence your feelings about aging?

Feelings about physical changes

Now I just want to ask you a few questions about how you perceive your own body and physical appearance as you age.

What kinds of changes in your body and physical appearance have you noticed that you see as related to aging?

How do you feel about age-related changes in your physical appearance? Do you view them as positive, negative, or neutral? Explain why you view them as positive, negative, or neutral. What do those changes mean to you in terms of how you feel about yourself?)

Think about the identities or roles that are important to you. Does the fact that you are aging physically influence how you see yourself or how others see you in those roles?

People have different feelings about the importance of their race or ethnicity. It's really important for some people, not at all for others. How central is your race or your ethnicity to your identity—that is, how important is it in your life? If it is important, in what ways is it important to you?

Do you think that being [...] (Black, Latina, or White) influences how you feel about aging?