

This article is downloaded from



CHARLES STURT
UNIVERSITY

CRO

CSU Research Output
Showcasing CSU Research

<http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au>

It is the paper published as:

Author: L. G. Terrill and J. Gullifer

Title: Growing Older: A Qualitative Inquiry into the Textured Narratives of Older, Rural Women

Journal: Journal of Health Psychology **ISSN:** 1359-1053

Year: 2010

Volume: 15

Issue: 5

Pages: 707-715

Abstract: This study explored experiences of eight rural, Anglo-Australian women aged between 65-75 using semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed three prominent themes: (a) the free and busy me highlights the increased freedom in later life enabling choices regarding activities the women would like to engage in; (b) the secret is being positive and pragmatic emphasises the importance of adopting a pragmatic acceptance of growing older; and (c) narratives of growth and stagnation highlights the pursuit of growth among older women in order to enhance the current self. Findings emphasise the construction of later life as one of liberation, resilience, and growth.

Author Address: lterrill@insightg.com.au

jgullifer@csu.edu.au

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1359105310368180>

<http://hpq.sagepub.com/archive/>

http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=14091&local_base=GEN01-CSU01

http://unilinc20.unilinc.edu.au:80/F/?func=direct&doc_number=001595200&local_base=L25XX

CRO Number: 14091

**Growing Older:
A Qualitative Inquiry into the Textured Narratives of Older, Rural Women**

Keywords:

Ageing Women; Rural Women; Qualitative;

Primary Author:

Name: Lauren G. Terrill
Institution: Charles Sturt University
Postal Address: 1/8 Danilenko Street PARKES NSW 2795
Phone: 0419 602 228
Email: lterrill@insightg.com.au

Secondary Author:

Name: Judith Gullifer
Institution: Charles Sturt University
Postal Address: School of Psychology, Charles Sturt University Panorama Avenue, BATHURST
NSW 2795
Phone: 02 6338 4572
Fax: 02 6338 4401
Email: jgullifer@csu.edu.au

This is a preprint of an article submitted for consideration in the Journal of Health Psychology

Copyright © 2010 by SAGE Publications; Journal of Health Psychology is available online at:

<http://hpq.sagepub.com/> [with the open URL of the article not yet available]

**Growing Older:
A Qualitative Inquiry into the Textured Narratives of Older, Rural Women**

Abstract

This study explored experiences of eight rural, Anglo-Australian women aged between 65-75 using semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed three prominent themes: (a) *the free and busy me* highlights the increased freedom in later life enabling choices regarding activities the women would like to engage in; (b) *the secret is being positive and pragmatic* emphasises the importance of adopting a pragmatic acceptance of growing older; and (c) *narratives of growth and stagnation* highlights the pursuit of growth among older women in order to enhance the current self. Findings emphasise the construction of later life as one of liberation, resilience, and growth.

Growing Older: A Qualitative Inquiry into the Textured Narratives of Older, Rural Women.

Overview

Traditionally, research on ageing has emphasised age as a time of “decay” (Haber, 2000), and many theories of ageing, for example, genetic and homeostatic failure theories (Van Der Molen & Ridderinkhof, 1998) conceptualise ageing as a progressive, inevitable phase of senescence. However, not all abilities decline with age. Despite findings on age-related gains, Haste, Helkama and Markoulis (1998) argue that of the many gains associated with ageing, most are likely to be ill-defined constructs such as contentment, compassion, and integrity, which are hard to operationalise. Arguably this may be the reason why to date, research has identified losses in ageing as opposed to gains (Ranzijn, 2002).

The focus on losses and “deterioration” of older adults foster a sense of “ageism”, resulting in negative attitudes towards ageing and older people that may mask a society’s fear of the ageing process (Butler, 1975). Consequently, ageism has social implications in areas such as health and community services, and social policies (Gething, 1999; Hatch, 2005). Such implications call for a greater need to research and publicise the positive aspects of ageing to combat ageist practices and thus provide a more holistic view of ageing which demonstrates the productive capacity of older people.

Baltes and Baltes’ (1990) metamodel of *selective optimisation with compensation* focuses on the construct of “successful ageing”. This model reflects the interplay between gains and losses in later life in relation to general processes of adaptation (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). The model highlights three interacting elements: *selection*, i.e. increasing restrictions of one’s world to fewer domains of functioning, and adjusting expectations in order to permit the subjective

experience of personal satisfaction and control; *optimisation*, i.e. engaging in behaviours to enhance general reserves and to maximise one's chosen life journey; and *compensation*, i.e. compensatory efforts to overcome reduced behavioural capacities and to involve resources from the mind and / or technology (Baltes & Baltes, 1990).

It is apparent that a disjuncture exists between the literature/media portrayals of older people, and the lived experiences of older people themselves. Psychology has often overemphasized measurement of the individual in isolation, which ignores people's interactions with their environment (Ranzijn, 2002). The *experiences* of ageing therefore need to be explored and understood in order to fully appreciate the ageing process.

On being old and female

Traditionally, older women have been neglected in ageing research, with gerontology remaining genderless, and women's studies remaining ageless (Browne, 1998). Consequently, older women's prescribed social realities contrasts with their own subjective realities in the way gender roles dictate a woman's identity to be synonymous with reproductive and family roles such as mother, wife, and nurturer (Browne, 1998).

Despite these findings other researchers have suggested that many women *do not* define themselves by traditional sex-role stereotypes. For example, Leonard and Burns' (1999; 2006) original and follow-up studies on turning points in the lives of midlife and older women found that the most frequently reported turning points were related to personal growth experiences, rather than the expected turning points of marriage and motherhood. Despite the plethora of gender neutral research relating to ageing, the 1990's witnessed a growing interest in research focusing on older women's subjective experiences of ageing which has challenged the androcentric nature of past gerontological research (Feldman, 1999).

“Voices as Paramount” research

Fenwick-Ridley’s (2006) research of diary studies and interviews with a group of women aged 65 years and older found that older women view their ageing positively, and that ageing brought confidence, freedom, self-awareness assertiveness, and a sense of control over their lives. The self-awareness and assertiveness that was found in Fenwick-Ridley’s (2006) research parallels the findings reported in Feldman’s (1999) three-year longitudinal study which explored the changing concerns in the lives of 40 women, aged 70-85 years. These women were concerned by images in the media portraying women’s importance being embedded in their youthfulness and ability to procreate, which reflect the ageist assumption that older women have outlived their usefulness and are a burden on society (Feldman, 1999; Frieden, 1993).

Despite the growing appeal of drawing on a range of multimodal methods of inquiry, there are limitations with research using “voices as paramount”. For example, Feldman (1999) notes the tendency to present a glorified view of ageing by oversimplifying and replacing frailty and illness with strength, courage and health. By overemphasising ageing as an active period where people can live their lives in an engaged way, we may be creating impossible stereotypes of “super ageing” (Feldman, Kamler, & Snyder, 1996). Further to this, Deveson (1994) warns against the dichotomous construction of ageing as either all positive or all negative, arguing that we need to be realistic in our view of older age.

Context of the study

Living in a rural area (i.e. outside of major metropolitan districts) adds a unique dimension to the experiences of older females. Unfortunately, empirical research investigating rural women’s experiences with ageing has been largely limited to samples of *farming* women (Alston, 1995; Bowden, 1995; Deveson, 1994; Shenk, 1998).

Consequently, the current study aimed to explore the subjective experience of ageing from the perspective of older women living in rural areas. This study was undertaken to address the paucity in literature exploring older women's "un-narrated" lives, in the hope of forming a more respectful view of ageing by exploring the textured (i.e. multi-layered and rich) narratives among a sample of women living in rural areas.

Method

Participants

Sampling

A "snowball" sampling method was used with the following selection criteria: female; 60 years or older; has lived outside of major metropolitan areas for most of her life; is currently living in the community outside of institutional care; and is willing to be interviewed. Initially, four women were identified through an older woman known to the first author. They in turn recommended women who may be interested in being interviewed. In line with qualitative guidelines, the process of data collection continued until redundancy of the material was evident (Hayes, 2000). Redundancy occurred after eight interviews, thus creating a final sample size of eight participants.

Demographic information

Eight Anglo-Australian women aged between 65-75 years were interviewed. At the time of interviewing, all of the women were living in a regional town in Central Western New South Wales, and were living outside of institutional care. Of the eight women interviewed, seven had children, four identified as "married", two identified as "divorced", one as "widowed", and one as "never married".

Procedure

Prior to initiating the interviews, the research was approved by the institution's Ethics in Human Research Committee and each participant provided written informed consent. Interviews were audio recorded and ranged from 35-65 minutes in duration. The interviews were conducted by the first author, who was a young female. This age gap is noteworthy when considering the nature of the data produced from the interview. However, the sampling method allowed for a degree of trust to be established before the interviewer and participants were formally introduced (Neuman, 2006).

Interviews were guided by a list of open ended questions centred on three main discussion areas: (a) the lived experience of each participant; (b) age related changes; and (c) aspects of social engagement and productivity. The semi-structured interview schedule was piloted and resulted in small changes that enhanced the interview experience for both participant and interviewer.

Data Analysis

At the completion of each interview, the recordings were transcribed and thematically analysed in line with Hayes' (2000) guidelines. Each transcript was read and coded to highlight material relevant to the research aims. Secondly, a search for patterns and commonalities among items of interest was conducted with items of similar content grouped in "proto themes" (i.e. the initial formation of a theme). Each proto-theme was examined in detail to identify its meaning and possible interrelationships with other proto-themes (Hayes, 2000). All transcripts were then re-examined for further evidence of each proto-theme. This process was repeated until no new information was found to support each theme; hence the data had presumably reached "saturation" (Hayes, 2000). Using all available evidence (including field notes and data extracts) each theme was formalised by labelling, defining, and selecting relevant supporting evidence

(Hayes, 2000). To finalise the process, a second literature review was undertaken to provide a more systematic review in line with the findings from the analysis.

Rigour and trustworthiness in qualitative research are necessary elements to maximise the potential for generating meaning. Thus, we acknowledge that the research results were influenced by a variety of intersubjective dynamics (including the explicit age difference between participant and interviewer), as well as author preconceptions, initial research goals, and the reflexive process that is paramount to qualitative research (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). In light of this, respondent validation was sought in which five participants were contacted and provided with an overview of the findings. Agreement was unanimous among the women contacted, suggesting that the results captured their experiential account of ageing.

Findings

The thematic analysis resulted in the construction of three prominent themes: (a) *the free and busy me* which highlights increased freedom in later life for women to make choices about activities they would like to engage in; (b) *the secret is being positive and pragmatic*, which emphasises the importance of a pragmatic acceptance of growing older; and (c) *narratives of growth and stagnation* which highlights the pursuit of growth among older women in order to enhance the current self.

Theme 1: The free and busy me

This theme entails the perception of later life as a time in which one is free from traditional social roles and expectations to choose activities they would like to engage in. Discussions of freedom, choice, and keeping busy were prominent in each interview. In earlier life stages busyness appeared to serve as a function of a woman's role as a nurturer, however in older age, busyness is constructed with a new meaning, a form of freedom from being restrained within a nurturing role:

I've got that choice now, where as before with family care we had to consider them and be home by a certain time to feed them and all that, but this time, I just please myself, so ah, it's not a bad life! (Joyce)

Thus, ageing has induced a sense of “freedom” from such responsibilities, thereby opening up greater opportunities for keeping busy. The sense of freedom in this theme is synonymous with the availability of more time, thereby allowing one to seek out and participate in a range of activities to maintain a busy life. Consequently, the importance of keeping busy and active was expressed by all the participants, exemplified by Ruth and Beth:

I seem to always be busy, but...I would not be happy if I wasn't busy. (Ruth)

I'm always on the go, I'm always doing something, I don't sit down a lot, I'm usually outside pottering about the yard...there's always something to do. (Beth)

Being actively involved appears to foster many forms of “fitness” which Butler (1991) proposes as the essential components for success in ageing. These forms of fitness include physical (strength, resistance and ability), intellectual (keeping the mind active and engaged), social (formation and maintenance of personal relationships) and purpose (positive esteem and control) (Butler, 1991). It is plausible to suggest that keeping busy functions as an adaptive strategy to adjust to the various transitions into older adulthood, such as retirement from work, care giving, or parenting. The adaptive function of remaining “busy” parallels Stern’s (2002) notion of a “cognitive reserve” in which stimulating activities may provide a degree of immunity against the effects of ageing and mild dementia on cognitive functions. “Busyness” is conceived as a central notion in older women’s lives, therefore to stop this activity may not be viable:

It has taken me a while, a long time to adjust, that I didn't have to come home from a meeting, unpack my bag, think 'I'll have to get that washing done, I've got to do things around the house' ...it would be just impossible for me to stop, because my cogs don't work that way... (Jan)

The importance of remaining involved in activities of choice is consistent with results from Bowling's (2008) study on perceptions of active ageing among older adults, in which older people were found to perceive active ageing as maintaining physical health and functioning, including exercising the body and mind. Activities for keeping busy clustered around self-directed or other-directed activities. Self-directed forms of "keeping busy" relates to individual commitments to self-betterment and learning, such as enhancing self-development and pursuit of self-oriented goals. For example, Maria's choice to attend classes on becoming more assertive:

...I thought no, I need to do this for me, and I'm not going to put up with any more crap from anybody, I'm going to stick up for myself and...demand my rights...rather than going away and crying about it, and just dissolving, I would just stand up for myself...so I think those lectures and classes were very beneficial to me.. (Maria)

Helen is actively involved in learning about spiritual healing and self-growth:

Doing different things that we are doing, like the Mind Body and Soul...and Reiki, and mixing with spiritual healers...if you're ready to learn something all the time about yourself and being a different person, [you are] a better person for it... (Helen)

Activities which encourage the pursuit of self-development and growth can be conceptualised as a form of *self-work*, which refers to a variety of cognitive, emotional, and physical developments that are self-initiated (Leonard & Burns, 1999). "Self-work" has been found to be an important turning point in women's lives, especially when women reach the age of 40 and beyond (Leonard & Burns 1999; 2006). Further to this, the notion of spirituality as a self-directed activity reflects Tornstam's (2005) theory of "Gerotranscendence", which asserts that spiritual development gradually increases from middle age, thereby shifting from a materialistic, role oriented philosophy, to a transcendent, spiritual perspective (Tornstam, 2005).

The second cluster of choices for keeping busy involves other-directed activities, which reflects the importance of helping others:

It's just great to be able to help somebody...you go there one day and you might just make somebody smile, or somebody that you've been talking to that has been away with the fairies for months and all of a sudden they'll squeeze your hand...it's just the best sensation. (Joan)

Notions of helping others were a strong feature among all of the women interviewed. These helping behaviours reinforce the notion that the contributions made by older adults outweigh any perceived “burden” that they may be (Kendig & Browning, 1997). This theme also highlights the benefits of community activities in enhancing the wellbeing of older women, as well as making positive contributions to rural communities at large (Atterton, 2008).

Theme 2: The secret is being positive and pragmatic

This theme portrays how the participants conceptualise and accept their ageing. Having a positive outlook and a pragmatic acceptance of the inevitability of ageing are essential ingredients for the transition and adaptation to older age (Gullifer & Thompson, 2005). The construct of “old age” is challenged by the participants’ assertion that age is merely a number, thus what is more important is how one chooses to accept, or resist their ageing:

Age is a number, and I think it's how you apply it to yourself. (Jan)

It depends on yourself, if you want to give in to age, then well it's going to be a drag, but if you continue on with what you are used to doing, well there is nothing you can do about it anyhow...it's the way you accept it I think. (Joyce)

Older age is therefore perceived as a state of mind – something to accept by maximising opportunities and compensating for some changes (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) or something to resist, leading to slow stagnation. This parallels the principle of “use it or lose it” (Azar, 2002), which suggests that increased mental activity can reduce the risk of developing symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease (Azar, 2002), and is of relevance to acceptance or resistance of ageing:

I think that you have got to have things to do, or otherwise you will just go stagnant, and die. (Helen)

The theme highlights a pragmatic view of the ageing process in which the women remain keenly involved in activities of choice, whilst acknowledging their limitations. For example, Beth explains how acceptance and patience have allowed her to remain engaged in activities she used to perform:

It can be frustrating, things you want to do, and you try to and you can't because you're that much older...like trying to be a 20-year-old in a 65-year-old's body and it just doesn't work...but you learn to do things in different ways...you can work out how to do things...with the garden digging, well a garden fork is still a garden fork and it's still hard work, but you just go a little bit slower and dig a little bit less each time! (Beth)

Thus, Beth's physical limitations are overcome by thinking innovatively:

You think about it for a while, just take it easy, relax and think 'how can I do that?' such as lifting things, I've got a little trolley I can put things in now and wheel 'em around if I want to lift something, and I've made myself a little pulley I can move things in so I can pull things up, down underneath, drop it in the boot and I don't have to lift it. (Beth)

Using alternative means to meet one's goal parallels the compensation component of Baltes and Baltes' (1990) metamodel of *selective optimisation with compensation*. According to this model, compensation refers to "the use of alternate means to reach the same goal" (Baltes & Carstensen, 2000, p. 72). In addition to compensatory efforts for losses in ageing, minimising health risks is a strategy that is also used:

You have these sorts of things as you're growing up, I've had two nervous breakdowns, and the usual old age things like arthritis and blood pressure and all those sorts of things, but you get treatment for that, you know, I can cope with that. (Joyce)

During each interview, discussions regarding age-related changes revolved around primary ageing, such as gradual bodily deterioration and physical ailments which do not infringe dramatically on daily functioning (Luszcz, 2004). Furthermore, despite the unpleasant changes associated with primary ageing, one's health and ageing is considered relative to their peers:

...a lot of people want to do something but just can't get past that barrier of actually doing it, so I think that's where I feel very privileged...I've had a lot of things that have

happened in my life but I've had a good life...and I think you can sort of reflect back on that and think well I've been one of the lucky ones. (Jan)

I feel sorry for old people who sit around all day in their armchairs, watch TV, read a book and do nothing, I think that must be terrible... (Maria)

Such comparisons to others who are less fortunate suggests a form of downward comparison (Girardin, Spini, & Ryser, 2006) which may assist in adjusting to the unpleasant changes with ageing by positioning oneself as more fortunate than others (Girardin et al., 2006). Therefore, despite physical health ailments, participants identify themselves as “healthy”, based on comparisons with others in similar circumstances.

Indeed, being “lucky” and “fortunate” featured strongly among the women, but was often juxtaposed with a sudden recall of adversity:

...but we've been blessed, we haven't had a lot of tragedy in our family like some families have. The good Lord has been looking after us, we've, oh, I lost my parents when I was only young... (Joan)

...there's been no big dramas...oh I suppose I've lost two children. (Joyce)

These traumatic and emotional events were quickly dismissed, suggesting that minimising one's adversity serves as a coping mechanism and cognitive bias, enabling us to frame our experience positively to maintain a positive sense of self (Power & Dalgleish, 1997). In these discussions of adversity the importance of having a positive outlook becomes salient:

I've been pretty lucky...I've had lots of dramas but they have all turned out pretty well, and even in losing [my daughter] I can see the upside...and I think being positive is the secret, you have got to be positive. (Maria)

...I think it's so important that ... you still have a positive outlook on life...you can't determine what you want to happen in life but you can determine how you are going to deal with that. (Jan)

Thus, despite the acknowledgement of age-related changes, life struggles, and tragedies, the participants maintain the importance of reflecting on and dealing with these adversities in a

positive and pragmatic manner, presenting a story which focuses on being positive, contented, and unregretful with one's life:

...you can't charter somebody else's course, but whatever course you charter yourself it's important that you enjoy doing it, so I can't say that I regret anything that's happened... I just find it's been great, I've had a full life, I still have a nice busy life and I'm still able to get up and go where I want to go and do what I want to do. (Jan)

It remains of key importance that the “secret” for a smooth ageing journey is to ensure a positive outlook on ageing, as well as accepting that ageing is inevitable, thus, we need to be pragmatic in our view of growing older. By doing this, the participants are able to maintain and enhance their life satisfaction. Arguably, on reflection of one's life, being satisfied with their life journey serves to foster a sense of integrity, in which feelings of contentment about their life choices are enabled (Erikson, 1985; Kail & Cavanaugh, 2007).

Theme 3: Narratives of growth and stagnation

It can be argued that we construct our experience as a series of self-narratives so we can make sense of our life, provide coherence, and build purpose (White, 1989). These stories determine which aspects of experience are selected for the ascription of meanings (White, 1989). Within each interview, narratives emphasising *growth* were clearly present, that is, stories emphasising resilience, continuous growth, activity, positive experiences, and future aspirations. However, alternative “stagnation” narratives were also present. In this context stagnation refers to a static or stationary period of discontinued growth and development, implicated in hardships and negative experiences. These “stagnation” storylines were suppressed by focusing on growth narratives. Despite the uniqueness of each woman's life trajectory, the persistence of growth narratives encapsulated each woman's experience so strongly, that in the follow up participant check, each woman agreed to the growth storyline with enthusiasm. By reflecting on positive

experiences and believing that one has accepted ageing in a healthy way, one's ageing journey becomes fashioned in a positive light:

... you have got to be positive...as soon as people get negative and depressed and sit around feeling sorry for themselves, I think their life is nearly over. (Maria)

...so no I think there's nothing in my life that I would change...I just think I've been lucky and...I think if a lot of people had my journey they would be happy. (Joyce)

Despite the participants' overall summation of their life as a happy, fortunate journey with no regrets, there were times during the interviews when alternative "stagnation" narratives were apparent, arguably representing a form of restriction:

...I can't walk very far because of my arthritis of the spine...you're sort of confined a bit you know when you're getting our age and you can't sort of indulge a lot of the physical activities. (Joyce)

Not quite as much going out as we used to...we learnt how to dance when we came here...so that's been a great social thing for us, but as we are getting older and having arthritis and things well that's gone by the way a bit too...(Maria)

Restriction of this kind reflects a mind-body disparity whereby there is discordance between a growing mind and a slowing body. This disparity has been recognised by Clarke's (2001) notion that one's ageing body represents both a mask and prison of the self, in which the inner self is youthful in contrast to the outer, older self. Further to the experience of restriction in older age, stagnation narratives revealed an underlying fear of losing one's independence:

Most people's biggest fear as you get older...you start to think well you know I don't want to be cared for, I don't want to be unable to look after myself. (Maria)

I want to be a great-grandmother...but I certainly don't want to be around if I can't look after myself, I don't want that at all. (Maria)

Thus, narratives of stagnation emphasising failing health and a loss of independence may reflect the nature of secondary and tertiary stages of ageing whereby there is greater dependence on others as one's health increasingly deteriorates (Luszcz, 2004). Arguably, Baltes and Baltes'

(1990) principles of *selective optimisation with compensation* serve as a mediator in minimising the disparity between a growing mind and an ageing body. Consequently, narratives of growth are emphasised as the lens through which one's life is reflected upon, interpreted by, and lived out. This is carried out while suppressing and downplaying one's alternative "stagnating" stories.

Discussion

Two manifest themes emerged in this research (a) *The free and busy me*, and (b) *The secret is being positive and pragmatic*. Whilst it was important to distinguish between themes, the third theme *Narratives of growth and stagnation* indicates a latent theme which interconnects with the first two. In order to conduct a deep interpretation of the women's' narratives it was important to develop an understanding of more than the manifest content of the interviews. It was important to find experiences and perceptions derived from a deeper analysis of what is often 'unsaid' or implied by the participants. The core dynamic of growth seemed to provide a deeper understanding of the two manifest themes. Thus, exploring the content of the two manifest themes through an iterative engagement with the transcripts revealed the dominance of growth over stagnation narratives as prominent within this research.

There is paucity in the literature exploring narratives of growth among older adults, which contrasts against the mass of literature which has established old age as a time of decay and decline (Haber, 2000). Furthermore, the notion of future aspirations within growth narratives challenges the assumptions which underlie classical theories of ageing. For example, Erikson's (1985) final psychosocial stage of development proposed that older people engage in a *life review*. This assumes that older people engage in a *review* of the journey they have already travelled, and fails to highlight the ways in which older people look *forward*, as well as

backward. Looking forward and planning for the future is indeed a salient aspect of the growth narratives among the women interviewed, as exemplified by Ruth:

...it [growing older] makes you think about what's ahead and what's behind...and you know that you've lived more than half your life, so you think well just how much further have I got to go, and what can I do with what I've got left?...what can you do with what you've got left, and how can you achieve... (Ruth)

Consequently, thinking about the future and what one plans to do with their future is a fresh understanding of ageing, which is not often considered among traditional conceptions of ageing. This finding is important in that it challenges the existing (gender neutral) theories and models of ageing which conceive later life as largely a period of reflection and review (Erikson, 1985), or focus on *maintenance* of a person's present state of functioning (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). This should not be taken to discount these theories and models of ageing, indeed many of the stories and experiences among older women are neatly accounted for by such explanations. However, they cannot capture the gestalt of each older woman's experiences of ageing nor the notion of growth that remains a paramount feature of this study.

Although findings in the present study are novel and important, some limitations are noteworthy. The snowball sampling strategy which resulted in a homogenous sample poses limitations on the study's transferability, therefore cannot account for the ageing experiences of women from different cultural, geographical, or generational backgrounds. Nor can these findings parallel the experiences of women from similar demographic backgrounds. Research exploring different participant samples is therefore warranted, especially with women from different cultural backgrounds, living arrangements (i.e. community versus institutional living), and age group (i.e. 85 years and older). It is also important to note the incorporation of "aspects of social engagement and productivity" as part of the interview agenda. This may have geared

the interview to focus on this area at the expense of discussing other areas relevant to one's ageing.

Conclusion

To conclude, this research explored the subjective experience of ageing from the perspectives of older, rural women. The themes discussed have constructed the ageing experience as a time of freedom that enables choices for remaining busy, as well as reflecting on how each woman deals with ageing, that is, by having a positive outlook and pragmatic acceptance of ageing. The themes draw together the notion of growth in older age, potentially reflected by the dominance of growth narratives and the subsequent suppression of stagnation narratives. Having greater freedom to make choices about one's life encourages older women to engage in activities which foster and nourish their identity. In this study, one's ageing journey acknowledges physical decline and a general slowing down, but highlights meaning in older age which is drawn from self-narratives. Growth, as a notion involving activity, self-development, and future aspirations is constructed through a prospective lens. This is a unique and important finding, in which further research is warranted to generate insight into the meanings and forms of growth in later life. It is hoped that the findings from this study can build onto existing theories of ageing and provoke enough interest in forming a new conception of older age which emphasises activity, forward looking, and the pursuit of growth rather than disengagement, maintenance, and reminiscence.

References

- Alston, M. (1995). *Women on the land: The hidden heart of rural Australia*. Kensington, NSW: UNSW Press.
- Atterton, J. (2008) Demographics of the ageing rural population. *Working with Older People: Community Care Policy & Practice*, 12(3), 19-22.
- Azar, B. (2002). Use it or lose it? *Monitor on Psychology*, May, 48-50.
- Baltes, P. B., & Baltes, M. M. (1990). Psychological perspectives on successful aging: The model of selective optimization with compensation. In P. B. Baltes, & M. M. Baltes (Eds.), *Successful aging: Perspectives from the behavioral sciences* (pp. 1-34). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Baltes, M. M. & Carstensen, L. L. (2000). The process of successful aging. In E. W. Markson, & L. A. Hollis-Sawyer (Eds.), *Intersections of aging* (pp. 65-81). Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company.
- Bowden, R. (1995). *Women of the land: Stories of Australia's rural women*. Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Corporation.
- Bowling, A. (2008). Enhancing later life: How older people perceive active ageing? *Ageing and Mental Health*, 12, 293-301.
- Browne, C. V. (1998). *Women, feminism, and aging*. New York: Springer.
- Butler, R. (1975). *Why survive? Growing old in America*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Butler, R. (1991). Foreword. In J. Birren, & D. Deutchman (Eds.), *Guiding autobiography groups for older adults*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Clarke, L. H. (2001). Older women's bodies and the self: The construction of identity in later life. *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 38(4), 441-465.
- Deveson, A. (1994). *Coming of age: Twenty-one interviews about growing older*. Newham, Victoria: Scribe Publications.
- Erikson, E. H. (1985). *The life-cycle completed: A review*. New York: W.W Norton & Company.
- Feldman, S. (1999). Please don't call me 'dear': Older women's narratives of health care. *Nursing Inquiry*, 6, 269-276.
- Feldman, S., Kamler, B., & Snyder, I. (1996). *Something that happens to other people*. Sydney: Random House.

- Fenwick-Ridley, S. (2006). *Narratives of ageing: Experiences of older women*. Retrieved July 1st, 2007, from <http://adt.waikato.ac.nz/uploads/approved/adtuow20060608.095050/public/01front.pdf> (In Press). University of Waikato
- Frieden, B. (1993). *The fountain of age*. London: Random House.
- Gething, L. (1999). Ageism and health care: The challenge for the future. *Australasian Journal on Ageing*, 18(1), 2-3.
- Girardin, M., Spini, D., & Ryser, V. A. (2006). *Frailty process and well-being: An evaluation of the downward social comparison efficiency in later life*. Geneva, Switzerland: Centre for Interdisciplinary Gerontology. Retrieved September 9th, 2007, from <http://cig.unige.ch/recherches/publications/gsa2006MG.pdf>.
- Gullifer, J., & Thompson, A. P. (2005). Subjective realities of older male farmers: Self-perceptions of ageing and work. *Rural Society*, 16(1), 80-97.
- Haber, C. (2000). Old age as a time of decay. In E. W. Markson, & L. A. Hollis-Sawyer (Eds.), *Intersections of aging* (pp. 39-51). Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company.
- Haste, H., Helkama, K., & Markoulis, D. (1998). Morality, wisdom and the life-span. In A. Demetriou, W. Doise, and C. F. Van Lieshout (Eds.), *Life-span developmental psychology* (pp. 317-350). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Hatch, L. R. (2005). Gender and ageism. *Generations*, 29(3), 19-24.
- Hayes, N. (2000). *Doing psychological research: Gathering and analyzing data*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2000). *Doing qualitative research differently: Free association, narrative, and the interview method*. London: Sage.
- Kail, R. V., & Cavanaugh, J. C. (2007). *Human development: A lifespan view* (4th ed.). Australia: Thomson.
- Kendig, H., & Browning, C. (1997). Positive ageing: Facts and opportunities. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 167, 409-410.
- Leonard, R., & Burns, A. (1999). Turning points in the lives of midlife and older women. *Australian Psychologist*, 34(2), 87-93.
- Leonard, R., & Burns, A. (2006). Turning points in the lives of midlife and older women: Five-year follow-up. *Australian Psychologist*, 41(1), 28-36.

- Luszcz, M. A. (2004). Psychological ageing: Themes and variations. *Occasional Paper No. 3*, South Australian Network for Research on Ageing. Retrieved August 8, 2007, from <http://www.cas.flinders.edu.au/sanra/>
- Neuman, W. L. (2006). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (6th ed.). Boston: Pearson.
- Power, M., & Dalgleish, T. (1997). *Cognition and emotion: From order to disorder*. East Sussex: Psychology Press.
- Ranzijn, R. (2002). Towards a positive psychology of ageing: Potentials and barriers. *Australian Psychologist*, 37(2), 79-85.
- Shenk, D. (1998). Subjective realities of rural older women's lives: A case study. In B. J. McCulloch (Ed.), *Old, female, and rural* (pp.7-24). New York: Hamworth Press.
- Stern, Y. (2002). What is cognitive reserve? Theory and research applications of the reserve concept. *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society*, 4, 448-460
- Tornstam, L (2005). *Gerotranscendence: A Developmental theory of positive aging*. New York: Springer
- Van Der Molen, M. W., & Ridderinkhof, K. R. (1998). The growing and aging brain: Life-span changes in brain and cognitive functioning. In A. Demetriou, W. Doise, & C. F. Van Lieshout (Eds.), *Life-span developmental psychology* (pp. 35-99). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- White, M. (1989). The externalizing of the problem and the re-authoring of lives and relationships. In *Selected papers*. South Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.