



## TWO GENERATIONS OF WOMEN DISCUSS THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF AGING

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### ABSTRACT

In the present study, 7 women born between 1930 and 1945 and 7 women born between 1965 and 1976 met separately in a series of multi-session focus groups to discuss their views of age. Sessions were audio-taped, transcribed, and analysed for significant themes and issues related to age and aging. Analysis uncovered six significant themes, including The Physical Self, Startled by the Passage of Time, Becoming Invisible with Age, Feeling Different than One's Chronological Age, Significant Age Markers, and Looking In and Looking Out.

### INTRODUCTION

Age identity refers to the aspect of an individual's self-concept that reflects the age(s) or age group(s) to which a person belongs, identifies with, and values. Thus, age identity is influenced by one's chronological age, one's health and individual aging process, one's peers, one's social interactions with others, and one's own historical influences. This research forms part of a larger study designed to re-examine the conceptual structure of age identity by asking community-dwelling men and women comprising four generations born between 1930 and 1976 to describe what age means to them and how it plays a role (or not) in their lives. Our focus here is the subset of participants comprising the youngest and oldest generations of women.

### METHOD

#### Participants

The **older women's group** consisted of 7 women born between 1930 and 1945 (i.e., Depression/WWII era generation) with a mean age of 63 years (range: 58-71 yrs). Most (71%) had achieved higher than a Gr. 12 education. The majority (57%) were retired whereas the remainder worked at least part-time. Three were married or living in a common-law relationship, one woman was never married, and two were divorced. Five of the women had children, although only one had a child living at home.

The **younger women's group** consisted of 7 women born between 1965 and 1976 (i.e., Baby Bust generation) with a mean age of 32 years (range: 28-38 yrs). All had some post-secondary education. Four women (57%) were married whereas the remainder had never been married. Close to a third (29%) had children; one woman was expecting her first child. One woman was a full-time mother, whereas the remaining 6 were engaged in paid employment, from irregular part-time to full-time positions.

## **Procedure**

Participants met in two aged-based multi-session focus groups. These focus groups were conducted over three 1.5-hour sessions held one week apart. All sessions were audio-taped. The first session was unstructured to allow for the spontaneous emergence of age-related themes and language. Transcripts of the first and second sessions were reviewed and questions were developed for the second and third sessions based on issues raised in the previous sessions. Participants were also invited to read all transcripts and make corrections or add clarifications.

## **Analysis**

Content analysis was performed on the session transcripts using the qualitative analysis software NVivo 2. Each group was independently coded by two research assistants, and then the two sets of codes were discussed. A final set of codes was achieved by discussion and consensus among all three authors.

## **RESULTS**

Six key themes emerged from the content analysis.

### **(A) The Physical Self**

The **women in the older group** provided a lengthy list of physical signs of aging that they had noticed in themselves, including weight gain, wrinkles, sagging and dry skin, and decreased energy.

- *"I feel restricted, not in my thinking or my interests, but more in my physical ... energy."*

In contrast, the **women in the younger group** did *not* spontaneously raise the subject of physical changes related to aging. When asked about such changes specifically, they provided a few examples, such as the appearance of grey hairs, wrinkles around the eyes, and the inability to recover as quickly as before from excessive drinking or sleepless nights.

- *"I will notice **grey hairs** and oh, what are, what are these grey hairs popping up? That's, you know, people that are older."*
- *"I have wrinkles now, around my eyes. It's like, aren't I too young to be having wrinkles? I'm not supposed to get wrinkles yet"*

For the most part it was the women in their 30s who noted such changes, while those in their 20s felt they were at their physical best. Clearly, signs of physical aging were not viewed as a critical aspect of age for this group.

The **older women** described how they sometimes noticed a disparity between their physical self and the way that they felt inside. One very powerful image that they used to describe this experience was that of catching sight of a 'stranger' in a mirror:

- *I'm constantly surprised when I look in the mirror, and "who's this old lady looking back at me?"*

This was *not* a sentiment to which the **younger women** could relate, although one woman commented:

- *"I think maybe ask me that question in 20 years, and I probably will look in the mirror and expect to see this look, and I'll have a different look."*

### **(B) Startled by the Passage of Time**

The fact that the **older women** were taken by surprise by physical changes that did not match their internal sense of age suggests that they may not have been conscious of the passage of time unless confronted with evidence of this. The **younger women** specifically described being startled by an awareness of time, but their evidence was not necessarily related to changes in their bodies. Instead, they described moments of insight related to relationships with other people.

- *"The fact that your relationships have been for 10 years, or 15 years, or whatever, that makes you think 'oh, where has time gone?' "*
- *I was looking at those boys, and we've got all these family photos when he and I were just that age and he looked so much like his boys look. And that's one of those moments where you stare and, 'How did we go from that...'* "

### **(C) Becoming Invisible With Age**

**Women in the older group** talked about becoming invisible as they aged, although there was some disagreement as to whether this was a negative or positive experience. One woman commented that she enjoyed the freedom from scrutiny that came with being invisible, but others felt that their invisibility was connected to a general devaluation of older people by society:

- *"You know we've become the invisible majority because the people just don't notice you. They'll overlook you because of your age...because they don't recognize us...and it also extends out to the way the world looks at us too."*

The **younger participants** could *not* relate to the experience of age-related invisibility at all.

### **(D) Feeling Different From One's Chronological Age**

In addition to a disparity between their internal sense of self and their physical exteriors, the **older women** did *not* necessarily feel their chronological age and did not feel the way they had always expected someone in their 60s or 70s would feel.

- *"I think we all agree we don't feel like we thought we would feel."*
- *"I also feel younger at 70 than I felt at 60, and younger than I behaved at 50 for sure; I can't remember being this exuberant."*

The women agreed that they had no guidelines or rules about how they should feel at their age, leaving them with the freedom to, in a sense, invent their age.

- *"There's nothing. There's no guidelines that says 'You're fifty eight, this is how you will act.' "*
- *"I don't know what my age is supposed to be like."*

The **younger women** also did not have a strong sense of being their chronological ages, and they discussed instances that made them feel 'younger', such as needing to ask a parent for support, or 'older', such as getting married or writing cheques. Like the older women, these women implied that the specific age or number did *not* have much meaning for them:

- *"If I didn't know how old I was, I wouldn't be able to tell you"*
- *"I often don't remember how old I am and if somebody said to me, 'Ooh that's wrong you're actually 30,' I'd be like, oh yeah. Like I just don't feel any different than I did 5 years ago."*

### **(E) Significant Age Markers**

Although the **younger women** were not overly concerned with their specific chronological age, 30 did appear to represent a significant milestone, particularly for those under 30.

- *But I feel like it is very separate. Under 30 and over 30 ... I'm feelin like, 'okay, 30's comin', things are gonna be different. Hopefully I'm gonna let go of things and not be so worried."*
- *"I'm finding that 30 is bigger than 20, 25, 19, any of those ages that I've come across so far ... like that's sort of adulthood for sure."*

For some, reaching or even passing 30 meant that there should be more of a focus on certain major goals, such as choosing a career or having children.

- *"I was **in** my 30s, so for me that's why its 31 and I just thought "well I better get on with my life because I'm gonna get too old to have kids if I don't hurry up and dump this guy and find somebody new"*
- *"When you're trying to plan your career, at the same time as planning when you're gonna have kids, the 30 age seems to kinda come up a lot"*

Surprisingly, the **older women** did *not* mention specific age milestones (such as turning 60 or 65).

### **(F) Looking In and Looking Out**

The **younger women** appeared to direct much of their attention outwards. Many of their goals involved other people, either actual or theoretical. Not surprisingly, partnerships and children were an important topic, whether that was seeking partners, hoping or planning for children, or finding ways to balance work and family obligations.

- *"So women around this age, they're just kind of thinking more about it [having children]. But it's hard too because your careers are just kind of getting started"*

In contrast, the **older women** barely mentioned their families at all. Instead, much of their energy appeared to be focused inwards; they felt that they had reached a stage in their lives when they wanted to focus on themselves and their own interests and development. Several of the older women specifically mentioned that they did not want to play the role of caretakers and nurturers, and were consciously resistant to the notion of retiring gracefully into 'grandmotherly' behaviour. Instead, they were eager to explore possibilities for themselves.

- *Part of growing old is people want you to be kind of a people pleaser, keep peace, and keep all the family. You know, 'Come for dinner, I'll cook, I'll clean, I'll do everything.' Well no, maybe I don't wanna do that."*
- *"I look forward to the years being something of a harvest time."*

The **younger women** appeared quite concerned about how they were perceived by others, although they did note that they felt more self-confident than they had in adolescence and their early 20s. They also paid attention to the behaviour of others, and were particularly critical of what they perceived as immature behaviour in others, particularly men.

- *"I was dating someone in the time that I was single... that was 36 and we were in a video store with his nephew and they were wrestling and I'm sitting thinking 'what in the hell are you doing?' ... It wasn't like 'Oh look at their childlike sense of wonder' "*

The **older women** seemed to have more of a live-and-let-live attitude.

- *"When I was young it was black, or it was white. Now there's a lot of grey and 'who cares'. If some guy ran nude down this hall I'd probably say 'oh what a fool' ... long as he ain't sitting on my knee, I don't care".*

The older women were also quite vehement in their insistence that they no longer cared much about others' expectations.

- *"I think there's a certain amount of freedom in having lived however long, because in a way you can get away with all kinds of things... outrageous things, and you just go, 'I don't care.' "*

These women indicated that 'childishness' was not immature, but rather positive, and seemed to relish opportunities to be playful and youthful.

## DISCUSSION

Analysis of multi-session focus groups addressing women's perceptions of age and aging showed that, not surprisingly, there were far more differences than similarities between women in their late 20s and 30s and those in their 60s and 70s. One theme common to both groups was that they did not always feel the same as their chronological ages. Perhaps because of this, the women in both groups were sometimes taken by surprise by the passage of time. The older women, but not the younger women, expressed what Pearlman (1993) has described as 'mid-life astonishment' or the sense that one's physical body does not match one's internal sense of self. Research (e.g., Karp, 1988; Pearlman, 1993) has suggested that this disconnect begins between the ages of 50 and 60, perhaps explaining why the older women in this study, who were nearly all above 60, could easily describe and relate to this experience.

The younger women in the study were dealing with issues related to career and family and age 30 emerged as a significant age marker. The older women, however, were dealing with the feeling that they were invisible, suggesting that Roebuck's (1983) observation that older women are invisible to society and often ignored in research and policy exists at an even more personal level. An interesting question to explore is at what age women begin to 'disappear', as the younger women could not relate to this concept at all.

Despite some negative aspects to aging, the older women in this study presented an enthusiastic endorsement of being their age. They talked about the benefits of experience and maturity, and a sense of freedom from societal expectations. These positive aspects of aging have been found in other research, including that of Furstenberg (1989), Karp (1988), Lin et al. (2004), and Palmore (1990). The older women in this study also appeared to be less concerned than the younger women with how they appeared to others, which seems to contradict previous research suggesting that older adults have lower-self esteem and are more concerned with maintaining social relationships

than younger people (Birditt & Fingerman, 2003; McMullin & Cairney, 2004). The older women in the present study seemed to represent the culmination of a process of growth in self-confidence that was just beginning for the younger women although, due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, it is not possible to say whether this is a developmental effect or a cohort effect.

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