OLDER WOMEN'S NARRATION OF THEIR EXPERIENCE(S) OF CREATING VOICE PRESENTED THROUGH ETHNOPERFORMANCE

by

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ABSTRACT

Through the process of ethnoperformance (a form of interpretive ethnography), I explore how women over seventy narrate their experiences of creating voice. If ethnoperformance is considered the fabric, then collaboration, creation of a safe environment, performative inquiry and discussion/debriefing are the essence of the fabric, the threads that when woven together create a long-lasting durable cloth. The epistemology or, how we come to know, within which the performance ethnography is co-constructed (social constructionism and qualitative inquiry, in this case performative inquiry) is found within the postmodern paradigm.

The purpose for this ethnoperformative research study is to discover the multiple ways in which older women narrate their experiences of creating voice in order to co-create and co-construct a reflexive teaching and counselling tool. This tool has the potential to create awareness and understanding of older women's experience of lacking and creating voice in order to allow for meaningful, even transforming human connections, and to empower participants, both individually and as a group, as they perform their stories of being silenced.

I position myself in this collaborative research study trusting that older women are empowered when they experience meaningful learning through an interweaving of “doing, knowing, talking and creating,” (Fels & Meyer, 1997, p.80) rather than simply being talked to or talked at. My interpretations for this study are constructed from the landscape consisting of individual pre-workshop conversational interviews, field notes, whole story (wholistic) and content narrative analysis of videoed workshops, journals (participants’ and researcher’s), and individual post-workshop conversational interviews.

Having analyzed and interpreted the data from the study and met with the participants for member checks and my peers for peer checks, I have concluded that the women in my study were empowered though the performing (doing, knowing, talking and creating) of their
individual stories. As well, I have outlined the group process of ethnoperformance that evolved from the six workshops and how voice is created through that process. Finally, I concluded that there were six group stories that were meaningful and common experiences to all five participants. I include the outlines for all six workshops and a discussion on how my findings relate or do not relate to current extant literature that is relevant to my research study.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Having grown up on a farm in a vibrant rural community, I believe that it is crucial to balance (bring into harmony) the rhythms of life and death, and everything in between, with regard to lifespan. I am part of a large extended family that valued the 'voices' of all generations and showed respect and appreciation for the wisdom and 'stories' of the older generations. Both farm life and our elders teach the process of the intertwining of life and death and usually, how 'natural' a process it is. Through the wisdom gained during a long life, the older generation has a lot to offer younger generations regarding the courage to live and die a meaningful life.

Since before my oldest child was born twenty-five years ago, my mother aged eighty and my step-father aged eighty have lived with my husband and me. I have an aunt who is almost eighty and a number of very close female friends who are in their seventies, eighties and nineties. As well, I have volunteered with seniors. Since childhood, I have enjoyed spending a lot of time with members of the older generation. So it's not surprising that in the present, I continue to be involved with my elders, especially my female elders. Being involved with my older female relatives and friends includes shopping with them for both necessity (groceries, pharmaceuticals, and so forth) and fun (everything else), going out for lunch and dinner, enjoying movies, plays, and concerts.

Over the years, I have become aware of what I would call a growing 'lack of relating positively and respectfully' to seniors by younger generations. More and more, I have witnessed and been told of incidents whereby children and adolescents have showed disrespect and disregard for seniors. I have talked with numerous adolescents who are uncomfortable around older people and say that older people 'freak them out.' These adolescents cannot be bothered to
talk to and associate with the older generation. Many of them are afraid of older people. I know older women who fear adolescents and have no meaningful relationships with them. I have spent time with many older women who feel ‘unheard’ by their own children.

Too many times seniors have related to me that they feel society resents the fact that they are still alive. I have witnessed and been told about older women being ‘bullied’ by their children, grandchildren, government employees, bank employees, bus drivers, taxi drivers, doctors and their receptionists, to mention a few. I have been complicit in far too many conversations in which female seniors were ignored, answered for or talked down to. Time and time again, I have noticed how often younger generations do not make eye contact with older people. Sadly, I have been witness to older women ignoring, patronizing and being condescending to other seniors whom are considered ‘friends’ and acquaintances because they consider them ‘old.’

**Statement of the problem**

In a society that reveres the image of youth, practices ageism, obsessively fears aging and death, discriminates against the elderly, and lags behind in providing effective counselling for the older generation, older women find themselves without voice and are ineffective in challenging the status quo. Generally, some of the ways that certain segments of society contribute to the silencing of older women are through: lack of respect, rudeness, anger, alienation, ignoring, patronizing, creating unattainable ‘ideals of successful aging, lack of eye contact, devaluing, blaming, condescension, lack of counselling services and interventions, and viewing aging, disability and death as somehow, unacceptable and disrespectful.

Society is blighted when it loses touch with its generation of elders and doesn’t think that they have anything to offer back to the younger generations. This short-sightedness on the part of society reminds me of the wisdom of the following words:
I consider the old who have gone before us along a road which we must all travel in our turn and it is good we should ask them of the nature of that road


Individuals of every generation, specifically, and communities as a whole, need to connect with the older generation in ways that are meaningful and mutually satisfying.

Erik Erikson (in Carlsen, 1991) states that, “In adulthood—you learn to know what and whom you can take care of” (p. 58). Further Erikson believes deeply that, “such caring is an integral part of the only happiness that is lasting” (p. 58). Not only do older women need to express their ‘caring’ in meaningful ways, but they must also be given the opportunities for this expression.

Carlsen (1991) questions the “maladaptive responses that may result from contemporary shifts in family systems and family investment” (p. 58). Generativity is being challenged. Where do older women find voice and identity in this ever-changing society if not through meaningful connection and participation in their relationships with their children and grandchildren.

I look to Carlsen (1991), who states: “I believe it is all too easy to adopt a posture that treats the older person as an object of our studies rather than a human participant in the human journey” (p. ix). In a society that is ever-evolving and ever-changing, I believe that it becomes convenient to dismiss the older generation as irrelevant and try to leave them behind in what Carlsen calls the ‘human journey.’ Robert Kastenbaum’s words on ‘core vision’ are especially pertinent with regard to making a meaningful connection with the older generation:

Limitations and distortions in our core vision of what it means to be a person becomes starkly evident in old age. If to be an old person is to suffer abandonment, disappointment and humiliation, this is not a “geriatric problem.” It is the disproof of our whole shaky pudding, technology, science, and all. If our old people are empty, our vision
of life is empty. (cited in Carlsen, 1991, p. 4)

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to uncover the ways in which older women narrate experience(s) of creating voice in order to create and construct a reflexive teaching tool to:

1. Create awareness and understanding of older women’s experience of lacking voice and creating voice in order to allow for meaningful, empathic, and perhaps, even transforming connections and relationships with regard to individuals, family, community and society. The study will create opportunities for spaces of potential and possibility – spaces on “the limen,...a threshold, a border, a neutral zone between ideas, cultures, or territories that one must cross in order to get from one side to another,” (Garoian, 1999, p. 40), ‘the borderlands’ (Denzin, 1997, p. 91), the third space, or what Peter Brook (1968) and Taylor and Saarinen (cited in Fels, 1998, p. 35), refer to as “the empty space” and “the white space” wherein collaborative and reciprocal exploration will lead, to what Taylor & Saarinen (cited in Fels, 1998, p. 28) calls ‘interstanding’ or a way of ‘coming to know’ that is among people.

2. Give voice to/empower participants as they live the process of constructing and narrating their stories of being muted or silenced so that they create voice. This process evolves through the collaborative creation, performance, and group discussion of performance ethnography or performative inquiry. An important goal of the ethnoperformance is to move participants, researcher, and group members as audience (spectactors) toward awareness, insight, agency, voice, empowerment, and efficacy.

In my study, I focus on four main areas that literature suggests may hinder women from finding their voice: alienation and invisibility, Western society’s image of older women, the meaning of successful aging, and the paucity of older women in counselling.
Many older women in Western society, with its focus on ‘individualism,’ staying young, and viewing ‘old’ as a negative state of being, find themselves being estranged or alienated and hidden or made invisible from mainstream society. Lack of voice and lack of agency contribute to discrimination whereby older women are too often viewed as ‘over the hill,’ ‘useless,’ ‘a waste of skin,’ ‘worthless,’ ‘incompetent,’ ‘nuisances,’ and lacking in value, common sense, and intelligence. Instead of being valued, respected and an important part of society, they are often overlooked (made invisible), or excluded, withdrawn from, estranged or rejected (alienated).

Society contributes to older women’s lack of voice by worshipping at the fountain of youth, stigmatizing aging and death, and placing limitations on people because of their age and gender. Gerontology, with its Western values, focuses on the ‘problems’ of aging. This is a very narrow and limiting focus. In many cases older women are treated in condescending and patronizing ways. No where is this more evident than the tendency of younger generations, health care practitioners, counsellors, and even older women, themselves, to use patronizing speech with elderly women. Too often elderly women suffer blame and criticism from their adult children and other segments of society, instead of being respected, valued and revered for the ample contribution many of them have made to family life. There appears to be a lack of communication between many older women and society in general. Aging is viewed by Western society as a negative transition fraught with ‘losses.’ Aging and appearing ‘old’ is to be avoided at all costs. Older women are stigmatized if they don’t adhere to the dogma of remaining youthful. Some older women strive to distance or separate themselves from the label of ‘old’ by not engaging with women who are deemed to be ‘old’ by others. It’s as if the worst possible outcome for them is to be seen by others as being ‘old.’

Rowe and Kahn (1998) coined the term “successful aging.” It encompasses an overall psychological, emotional and personality resilience and includes such factors as purpose in life, emotional intelligence, wisdom, having a growing social network of friends, and being engaged
in activities. The term ‘successful aging’ also stressed the importance of low risk of disease and disease-related disability. In the years since the concept of ‘successful aging’ was first proposed, a number of criticisms have surfaced with regard to what might be considered oppressive aspects of ‘successful aging.’ For instance, how narrow-sighted is it to limit ‘successful aging’ to an experience only disease-free and disability-free older individuals can attain? There are many older women with chronic diseases and a wide range of physical and disease-related disabilities who are engaged in living satisfactory, happy, spiritual and personal growth enhanced lives.

Baltes and Baltes (1998) suggest a model for aging that shifts the balance between losses and gains and promotes a balance between independence and interdependence. The psychologist and psychotherapist, Mary Baird Carlsen (1991), speaks to the creative possibilities that are within our reach as we age. Creativity is a key to aging successfully because it encourages the ‘perception of life events’ as potential spaces for personal growth and, ultimately, for hope. However, it must be taken into account that older women tend to have fewer financial resources and manageability resources than older men. Poverty in the Western world is not conducive to aging in a positive manner. Lower levels of manageability make coping with losses and life crises more difficult as we age. Death and disability need to be destigmatized and viewed as life experiences that are acceptable and respectable.

Schlossberg (1990) suggests that older women are underrepresented in counselling and that some counsellors and members of the medical profession may view the elderly in a negative light and be ill-trained to deal effectively with the older generation. Woolfe and Biggs (1997) state that some counsellors, may exhibit gerontophobia with regard to the elderly, including the belief that older people can no longer learn and, thus, cannot benefit from counselling. Counsellors’ own fears around aging and death may bring up negative feelings when working with the elderly population. Older women were raised in hard times. Many of them lived through wars and a depression. As a result, Florsheim and Herr (1990) say that the older
generation of women may have developed stoical attitudes toward losses and life crises. They may view going to counseling or asking for help as being weak, as having a character deficiency.

**Rationale for the Study**

The ‘culture’ of seniors has a lifetime of experience, knowledge (cognizance, knowledge gained through experience) and wisdom (knowledge plus perceptivity, insight, good judgement, and good sense), to pass on to the younger generations. Baltes and Baltes (1998) state that, historically, wisdom is “the peak of human excellence, the perfect integration of knowledge and character” (p. 2). Baltes and Staudinger (1993) define wisdom as “expert knowledge about life in general and good judgement and advice about how to conduct oneself in the face of complex, uncertain circumstances” (cited in Baltes and Baltes, 1998, p. 2). However, there is a paucity of research on giving voice to elders. A society that is not willing to ‘hear’ what our oldest generation has to say is losing an invaluable connection to ideas, stories, lore, history, and life. Carlsen (1991) is proactive in her quest “for those perspectives, attitudes, expectations, and involvements that are likely to bring constructive, creative approaches to the problems and potentials of age” (p. xi). She states that the most important goal of her quest is “to learn from those older than we who are serving as our guides, as our pioneers in a new prime of life” (p. xi). The seniors that I know want to be ‘needed’ in the most positive connotation of that word. They want to feel that they ‘belong.’ They want to feel worthy, accepted, respected, and, especially, useful. They want to contribute. As Erikson (1997) points out in his theory of generativity, ‘they want to care and care for.’

There is a dearth of older women accessing counselling and a lack of specific counselling interventions for that specific population. Western society is faced with far too large a percentage of older women who struggle with hopelessness, alienation, prejudice, lack of confidence and self-esteem, fear, loneliness, anxiety and depression. What a waste! They have
so much to offer, but they need to be connected with and listened to. Woolfe and Biggs (1997) and Garner (1999) suggest that a substantial number of counsellors fear aging and death, and are uncomfortable working with the elderly. As well, Schlossberg (1990), states that a substantial number of counsellors lack training in working with the older generation. Literature (Coleman, 2002, Cummings et al., 2000, and Garner, 1999) states strongly that the image of 'aging' is not popular in our youth obsessed society and this impacts negatively on older women. Elderly women, more so than elderly men, are viewed negatively for the state of their aging bodies.

Through embodied 'play' (drama) workshops, older women will have opportunities to reclaim their 'aging' bodies as sites of acceptance and pride. The ethnoperformance, also referred to as the performance ethnography (both terms are interchangeable), will both inform counselling and counsellors about older women's lack of accessing counselling, about the need to look deeper, inside oneself, for reasons why counsellors might resist working with their elders, and about proactive, engaging ways of working with older women that allow them voice.

Our elders are underrepresented in literature. The scarce, few articles I discovered that mentioned counselling with the older population, and specifically older women, (Schlossberg, 1990 and Florsheim & Herr, 1990) suggest that older people benefit from, and are more receptive to working in, groups. Ethnoperformance embraces group work. This study proposes a new research design for older women: a collaborative and reciprocal ethnoperformance from creation to construction to performance, for and with a group spectator audience. Collaborating with older women to construct and perform an ethnography that uses the participants, themselves, as the performers is unique. This study would provide a golden opportunity for all generations to 'peer through the windows of age' (Carlsen, 1991, p. xi). As a 'performed' teaching tool, this study would have a much wider audience than would a research report.

Finally, as a baby boomer, I am aware that my generation stands on the threshold of becoming 'the older generation.' Carlsen (1991) crystallizes eloquently my own concerns
regarding the treatment of our oldest generation and what that may imply when baby boomers shift into that category, when she states:

One of the bigger questions I am finding here is the question of ageism - of how we discriminate against the old in quiet, unnoticed ways, until we ourselves pass through the portals of age and discover that we are victims of our own stereotypes and discriminations. (p. x)

I hope that this study will help stimulate change in the near future, because the baby boomers will soon represent the largest number of seniors in Canadian history. The disquieting message that I hear from older female relatives, friends, and acquaintances is that when they were my age they did not feel the aching sense of being silenced that they are experiencing in their so-called ‘golden years.’

Research Question

How do older women narrate their experience(s) of creating voice through ethnoperformance?

What is Voice?

“Voice” is ever-evolving. It encompasses a wide range of attributes, characteristics, and ‘ways of coming to know’ that are as multifaceted as are the ways of aging and being old. Some words that evoke the meaning of voice are: belonging, communication, respect, agency, community, wisdom, courage, connection, empowerment, rightful, resilience and assertiveness. Voice does not necessarily have to be loud to be heard, but it must be genuine. Having voice, being listened to, ensures that an individual is valued.
Definitions

**Performance Ethnography/Performance Text:** “ethnographic and cultural texts turned into poems, scripts, short stories, and dramas that are read and performed before audiences—performed texts have narrators, drama, action, and shifting points of view” (Denzin, 1997, p. 91). The performance ethnography or performance text is a “genre within ethnography” (Denzin, 1997, p. 91).

**Ethnoperformance** (Paget, 1993), **ethnodrama** (Mienczakowski, 1994), and **performance and reflexive anthropology** (Turner, 1982) are all performance text/performance ethnography.

Researcher Bias

My interest and passion for this study comes from a lifelong involvement with an array of older people: great-grandparents, grandparents, great aunts and uncles, my own mother and aunts as they grew into their seventies and eighties, older women whom I have worked with, and my wonderful older friends.

I grew up believing that the majority of older people had a wealth of experience and knowledge, and that it was their responsibility to pass this wisdom on to the younger generations. I grew up marveling at how interesting older people were. I believe that older women have wonderful, engaging stories to tell us. My life journey has been richer because I grew up in an atmosphere that particularly revered the integrity, strength and wisdom of the oldest generation of women. I am particularly drawn to older women because I find myself compelled to listen to their stories. For me this is a natural process, a necessary process.

I feel passionately that many older women have much to offer society, and at the very least, they deserve the respect and caring of younger generations. At the very least, they should be listened to. Sadly, my experience with older women leads me to believe that society does not
truly honor them. Western society often treats older women in a manner that shows little dignity, little respect, and little caring.

**Theory and Philosophy**

The philosophy that colors my backdrop for this study is existentialism. Especially important to me are the following tenets of existentialism: authenticity in human relations, the importance of the ‘here and now,’ and the use of experience in the quest for ‘coming to know.’ Because I am working with the older generation, the Ericksons’ (1997) discussion of the theory of human development, the life cycle, especially the seventh (‘Generativity vs. Stagnation. CARE’) (p. 57), eighth (‘Integrity vs. Despair, disgust. WISDOM’) (p. 57), and ninth (‘DESPAIR AND DISGUST VS. INTEGRITY: WISDOM’) (p. 112) stages have relevance to this performance ethnography. I would draw upon feminist theory, or as Creswell (1998, p. 83) says, “feminist research approaches,” including a collaborative and reciprocal performance ethnography process, and the construction of nonexploitative relationships. As well, I would seek to construct an atmosphere within which participants would have voice. As the researcher, I would also be part of the study. Because the process of the ethnoperformance is collaborative, the researcher’s voice cannot help but be heard throughout the study. I would memo and keep my own journal of my impressions, feelings, interpretations and insights regarding the process of the ethnoperformance. These memo and journal entries might find a place in the ethnoperformance. As well, the voice of the researcher might be heard in the workshop pieces. As well, the role of the researcher as author, while limited is still visible. As well, in keeping with feminist theory, the goal of the performance ethnography is to construct performative acts that have the potential to be transformative.
However, because I position myself close to the philosophy, approach and practices of Norman Denzin (1997), and his take on interpretive/critical ethnography, I am more inclined to rely less on theory and more on a person's actual experience and the meaning of that experience. Individuals' telling of their narratives of personal experiences "draws on the philosophical thoughts of John Dewey, who saw that an individual's experience was a central lens for understanding a person" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, cited in Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 331). Some of the qualitative researchers whose work I will draw upon during the process of the ethnoperformance are Norman Denzin (1997) for his valuable insight into interpretive ethnography and performance texts, Jim Mienczakowski (1996, 2002), for his work in constructing educational ethnodramas, J. Saldana (2003), L. Fels (1998), and Gaorian (1999), for their work in performative inquiry and performance pedagogy, and D. Conquergood (1992, in Denzin, 1997) for his work in communication and ethics. Finally, I will refer to Mary Carlsen's (1991) work on creative aging to help inform the performance ethnography.

Description of and Rationale for the Method

The epistemology (how we come to know) within which I will co-construct the performance ethnography is found within a postmodern paradigm. Burr (1995), Denzin (1997), and Gergen (2001) suggest that postmodernism involves a variety of inter-related dialogues on the state of the world, existential crises, and the current conditions of society. Just as 'the nature of being is in flux,' many people feel that life (and their lives in particular) is undergoing rapid speed transitions and changes. Burr (1995), Denzin (1997), and Gergen (2001) zero in on the concept of 'change among chaos' that is responsible for generating inter-related dialogues. Simply put, we live in a time when many long-held traditions, beliefs, and values are being questioned, eroded, negated, dismantled, and left behind. We are left to face what Gergen (2001)
calls a "legitimization crisis: all claims to knowledge of self and world lose their authority—
everywhere there is questioning, challenging, mistrust and resistance" (pp. 29-30). This is the
'chaos' that Gergen, Burr, and Denzin refer to. However, it is among the so-called 'chaos' that
social constructionists see light for the future. Gergen (2001) suggests that through inter-related
dialogues, social constructionists hope “to reconstitute the past in far more promising ways” (p.
33). Gergen (2001) states, “the constructionist dialogues contain enormous potential; they open
up new spans of possibility for creating the future. This is so in the intellectual/scientific world,
in the world of professional practice, and in our daily lives” (pp. 4-5).

In my research process, I will be following what McLeod (2001) calls “qualitative
inquiry” (p. 1). McLeod goes on to say that the main goal of qualitative inquiry “is to develop an
understanding of how the world is constructed” (p.2). Qualitative inquiry tends to be rigorous
and provide thick, rich data because it seeks understanding and meaning. Qualitative inquiry
pulses within the heart of postmodernism and social constructionism because, as McLeod (2001)
points out, qualitative inquiry strives to understand how society is constructed and it has at hand
a variety of methodologies to do so. McLeod (2001) states:

The notion of the world being 'constructed' implies that we inhabit a
social, personal and relational world that is complex, layered, and can be
viewed from different perspectives. This social reality can be seen as
multiply constructed. We construct the world through talk (stories,
conversations), through action, through systems of meaning, through
memory, through the rituals and institutions that have been created,
through the ways in which the world is physically and materially
shaped. (p. 2).

My study follows the process of performance ethnography as adhered to by Denzin (1991) and
Mienczakowski (1997, 2001). Ethnography seeks to understand the experience(s) of a cultural
group. Performance ethnography seeks to make the experience visible to society, in the here and now—“to arrive at a truth that makes a difference and opens up new possibilities for understanding. This understanding is forever incomplete” (McLeod, 2001, p. 4). Performance ethnography is a reflexive representation, in dramatic form, of the lived experiences of the participants that “recreates a “recognizable verisimilitude of setting, character and dialogue” (Cohn, 1988, cited in Denzin, 1997, p. 93). A postmodern performance ethnography “will venture into those undefined, taboo spaces in which the unrepresentable in the culture is felt and made visible—” (Birringer, 1993, cited in Denzin, 1997, p. 93).

There are four major reasons why performance ethnography works for my study of how older women narrate their experience(s) of lacking voice: (a) it facilitates an exploration of experience, (b) it provides a collaborative co-construction of remembrances of lived experience that is performed for the group and has the potential to be made visible to members of society, (c) it gives participants a voice, and (d) it opens up what Lynn Fels (1998, p. 30) refers to as “the edge of chaos,---an unexpected space-moment of learning that bodymind dances into being.” The edge of chaos represents a space for the generation of possibilities for understanding and hope.

Significance of Topic and Study

Performance ethnography, with older women as participants, is a new and unique research design. The process of the performance ethnography may illuminate a number concerns revolving around older women’s lack of voice in Western society such as ageism, discrimination, devaluation, negativity associated with the word, ‘old,’ alienation, invisibility, focus on ‘staying young’ as the ideal, and so forth. The interviews, which provide most of the data for the ethnoperformance process, provide opportunities for women to reclaim their ‘voice.’ Collaborative, reciprocal, co-created and co-constructed workshops in which the lived experiences of women over seventy are performed offer more opportunities for participants’ to
move into what Denzin (1997) calls 'the borderlands' where risk-taking is necessary, courage is needed and the potential for awareness, insight and transformational possibilities are unlimited. Performative inquiry (performative or dramatic activities) and after-performance discussions allow participants, both as individuals and as a group to become involved in the ‘experience of creating voice,’ to recognize their complicity in ‘silencing’ and to come to ‘interstanding’ (Fels, 1998, p. 28) with one another.

Chapter Summary

Chapter one elucidates a number of pressing reasons for the need for research with regard to Western society’s muting of the voices of older women. In this chapter four areas of concern as ‘sites’ wherein our oldest generation most often is discriminated against are pointed out. As well, an educational and emancipatory tool, the ethnoperformance, is put forward as the research design for this study. A rationale is constructed that speaks to the paucity of research literature with regard to older women, and to the scarcity of older women who access counselling. The research question asks: “How do older women narrate their experience(s) of creating voice through ethnoperformance?” The framework of postmodernism, social constructionism, and qualitative inquiry within which the performance ethnography evolves, is discussed.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Context

In Erik H. Erikson and Joan M. Erikson’s (1997) extended version of “The Life Cycle Completed,” the authors present their theory of aging and point out the dynamic, interconnected, interweaving of the older individual and society. E. Erikson points out that “rather than be included, aged individuals are often ostracized, neglected, and overlooked; elders are seen no longer as bearers of wisdom but as embodiments of shame” (p. 114). J. Erikson is bewildered by the general attitude of present day Western society toward its elders. J. Erikson (1997) states that,

while historical, anthropological, and religious documents record that long-lived elders of ancient times were applauded and even revered, this century’s response to aged individuals is often derision, words of contempt, and even revulsion. If help is offered, it tends to be overdone. Pride is wounded, and respect is in jeopardy. The aged are offered a totally playless second childhood. If an elder can’t climb stairs readily or weaves as he or she walks, this misfortune is equated with a loss of thinking and remembering. It is often easier to give in to these verdicts than to defy them. (p.116)

A pertinent question is whether or not ‘giving into rather than defying these verdicts’ is one way that the voices of our elders are silenced. The Eriksons (1997) question why society has not attended, in creative and visionary ways, to the needs of a fast-growing older population with regard to including older individuals in society and designing ‘living accommodations.’ The Eriksons question the shortsightedness of excluding the older population from the rest of society
by shutting them away in care facilities—shortsighted because if our elders are society's 'role models' for passing on knowledge of end-of-life-preparedness, there will be a huge chasm among the generations, with regard to preparing for death.

In Carlsen's (1991), book on creative aging, the following topics relevant to this study are illuminated and discussed: perspectives on aging, the importance of combining aging and creativity, and ageism (ageist prejudice). Carlsen (1991) talks about a variety of 'agings.' Our elders should not be thought of as 'one common garden variety' of 'old'—they are as diverse in their aging as they were in their childhood, youth and adulthood. With regard to ageism, Carlsen (1991), speaks of society's tendency to push our elders "--- to the edge of cultural experience" until they "become the "invisible generation"" (p. 97). Carlsen believes that the practice of ageism in Western society ensures the negation, invisibility, or defamation of the unique qualities of individual older people. Such an atmosphere would contribute strongly to the muting of older women's individual voices. As well, if society's younger generations "live with a negative, fearful approach to later aging we will defeat many of those processes that can lead to creative aging" (Carlsen, 1991, p. 100).

**Alienation/Invisibility**

In S. Wray's article (2003) based on the findings of a study conducted by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), women's experiences of aging are compared in the light of their ethnicity and culture, "in the context of its Growing Older Programme---a key aim of the Growing Older Programme is to examine factors influencing the quality of life and well being of older people in Britain" (p. 513). This article focuses on the research participants' interpretation of quality of life. Over a period of six months, 170 women, between the ages of 60 and 80 years of age participated in detailed semi-structured interviews and focus groups in this qualitative study. Participants were ethnically differentiated as "English, British Muslim, African-
Participants were informed about the goals of the research as well as a wide range of life topics that they would be talking about. S. Wray discovered that gerontology with its Western values focuses on the problems of aging so that both cultural and ethnic life stories of aging are kept 'out of sight.' Wray found that different perceptions and experiences that do not focus on 'problems' are underrepresented or even ignored. Wray also found that the concept of 'successful aging' as theorized by Rowe and Kahn (1998), has been used to oppress older women. A good quality of life for older women, is aided when they feel they have some control by having power in decision making and are able to have a useful, active role in society. By listening to the voices and experiences of the participants, Wray discovered that older women have the potential for agency and self-fulfillment.

This is a well-written article with numerous outstanding quotations from the participants themselves. Wray is certainly cognizant of current extant literature and the history of social gerontology and successful aging. Wray's article illuminates how older women are stigmatized if they don't embrace 'the fountain of youth.' As well, the article reveals how sexism and ageism create a double standard of aging. In Western society aging is constructed as a deficiency.

In I. M. Olmedo's study (1999) elderly Latino women were studied to find out how they saw the meaning of their culture and how they viewed and experienced their role as migrants. Olmedo explored how the participants coped during times of life transition. In this narrative research study, Olmedo collected personal and family narratives through a group sharing process that involved eight women, aged 66 to 82 years who met for videotaped biweekly two hour sessions over a five month period. Four women also participated in videotaped individual detailed interviews. The videotapes were reviewed and topics and themes were identified. Olmedo found that her participants used storytelling as 'performance pedagogy' to re-envision
their culture. Narratives were both personal and communal. As the women came to shared understanding, they began to re-conceptualize their culture.

Olmedo’s narrative study of the reminiscences of elderly Latino women is beautifully written and very moving. It is a detailed study with thick, rich description. Olmedo was closely engaged with her informants over a lengthy period of time and created a research design that included multiple voices and multiple perspectives. The research experience provided the participants collaboration, reciprocity, and authenticity.

In L. C. Hurd’s study (1999), an understanding of how older women come to terms with their lived experiences and sense of self was sought. In this study, although a large number of individuals between the ages of 50 and 90 were interviewed, nine female informants aged 72 to 82 years were recruited and were studied over 30 hours of participant observation research. Data was analyzed via Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) grounded theory approach. Hurd found that older women strive to separate themselves from the label of ‘old’ and any ‘generalizing’ that is associated with ageist attitudes. There is an ever-present fear of ‘losses’ due to aging and a struggle to appear active. The participants were happy to escape being seen by others as being old.

Hurd’s article provides insight into why women fear being labeled as ‘old’ and why and how they, themselves, discriminate against their peers by distancing themselves from them and are complicit in reinforcing societal stereotypes of older people by viewing ‘old’ as a negative transition. The article also delves into why older women are more at risk for ageism and discrimination than are older men. Hurd discusses the North American obsession with youthfulness and physical attractiveness and how this exacerbates the image of old age as something to be feared and thus, to be ignored or hidden. Hurd suggests that women’s old bodies cause distress, disgust, fear and hate which leads directly to the rejection, invisibility and alienation of older women.
In S. R. Adler, S. A. McGraw and J. B. McKinlay’s study (1998), previous research findings are built upon by looking specifically at assertiveness and how older people can become active in challenging stereotypical views of health care providers toward the older generation. In this study, Adler, McGraw and McKinlay used a focus group project (sub-study) as a qualitative adjunct to the ‘Breast Cancer Patient Activation Study’ to bring to awareness what older women with breast cancer believed about the medical encounter and how they behaved with medical practitioners. The relatively structured focus group interview was the main method of data collection. Twenty-nine women aged 63 to 85 years from a variety of ethnicities participated in the study. They met for two ninety minute sessions that were tape recorded and transcribed. Using a qualitative research study process, Adler et al. found that all the focus group participants acknowledged that a crucial aspect of health care is developing a positive interpersonal relationship with one’s doctor and that this means being polite and non-confrontational. Overall politeness was considered to be an empowering behavior by the study’s participants, even though it is not conventionally thought of as an assertive behavior.

Adler et al’s study is highly cognizant of current extant literature, is in-depth, and has an excellent section on necessary further research. This study illuminates the effects of ageism and cultural expectations on older women that may be transferred beyond the medical encounter. The participants did not see themselves as ‘old’ and were very cognizant of discrimination toward their age group. The study clarifies the need for better communication between society and older women.

In J. H. Barlow and B. Williams’ paper (1999), the experiences of twelve older women with arthritis who attended a Personal Independence Course to empower them to ‘agency’ are explored. The original study consisted of two phases: a well established course designed to empower women to action with regard to their arthritis-related problems and a Personal Independence Course that followed the social model of disability(disability as socially
constructed) and promoted community involvement. Twelve women with arthritis, ranging in age from 52 to 67, were recruited. The experiences of the participants were explored qualitatively by gathering rich, detailed data via three semi-structured telephone interviews over a period of four months. Using Becker and Geer's (1982) data analysis approach, Barlow and Williams found that the PIC filled the gap caused by social and individual models of disability because it encouraged personal independence; it empowered older women who felt ignored by the community to act agentically.

Barlow and Williams' paper is an in-depth exploration of the impact a Personal Independence Course had on twelve women. It targets an area of research that has been neglected: older adults with arthritis. The qualitative study produced data that provided descriptive and detailed insight into the experience of women living with arthritis. The study speaks to 'community' empowerment and how the interactive process of group and or community change is inevitable as the participants change.

In J. Aronson's study (2002), data was drawn from a longitudinal study of older frail women in Ontario who were receiving home care to explore these women's experience of the repercussions on their lives due to a decrease in levels of community and social care. In this three year long critical ethnography study, Aronson studied twenty women living in their own homes in urban southern Ontario, aged 66 to 92 with a range of chronic health ailments. Twice a year participants were interviewed using semi-structured interviews that were taped and transcribed. As well field notes for telephone conversations and observations were kept. The interviews and field notes formed the basis for analysis. Using the qualitative critical ethnography process, Aronson uncovered three approaches that the women used to cope with the trimming of home care services: 'taking charge,' 'pushed over the edge,' and 'restraining expectations.'
Aronson’s longitudinal qualitative study is compelling, well-written and cognizant of current extant literature. The discussion section is excellent and the author is aware of the study’s limitations: with regard to transferability, the study is narrow in consideration of the sample’s cultural diversity, its focus on urban areas and one province. Narrow transferability will also be a limitation of my study. My study only involves six participants who are women who fall within a limited age range. They will be living somewhere in the Lower Mainland in British Columbia. As a critical ethnography, Aronson’s study reveals the ‘front line’ of home care as a site wherein older women put up a valiant struggle with little support for their voices with regard to agency and identity. The article speaks powerfully to the necessity of allowing the hidden or unvoiced to be uncovered and voiced.

In M. Rennemark and B. Hagberg’s study (1997), an investigation between sense of coherence and how the older generation perceived their life course was conducted in order to determine whether or not how older individuals remember and evaluate the past is influenced by and influences sense of coherence. Sense of coherence encompasses three attributes: comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. In this study, Rennemark and Hagberg had fifty-eight older individuals tell and interpret their life stories through a questionnaire using Erikson’s psychosocial stages of development. Sense of coherence was established using Antonovsky’s (1987) scale. Rennemark and Hagberg found that the more positive the perception of life course, the stronger is the sense of coherence, and that past life experiences determine the present life view.

Rennemark and Hagberg’s qualitative study is well written, thorough, and cognizant of extant current literature. The discussion section is in-depth and the authors recognize that more studies are needed on the topic. Rennemark and Hagberg’s qualitative study offers convincing arguments with regard to older individuals and their navigation of sense of coherence. The study is particularly relevant because it manifests the importance of manageability as appearing to be
the quality that most strongly generates the older generation’s ability to cope with life crises and
life transitions. The ability to cope is crucial to life satisfaction in later life. Aging equals
‘change’ and ‘loss.’ These events must be dealt with adequately for independent living. The
voicing of life experience(s) appears to imbue older people with a sense of personal power and a
positive identity to aid in the fight against the social stigma of aging. Older adults who are able
to negotiate social acceptance seem to be better adjusted.

In C. M. Morell’s study (2003) an attempt was made to give voice to the experience(s)
faced by women in late life using a feminist empowerment model in order to aid understanding
of and interventions for older women from a social work perspective. In this study, Morell
conducted in-depth interviews and conversations with four women in their 90s, looked at the
writings of ‘old’ older women and studied pertinent feminist literature dealing with social work,
gerontology and disability. Morell discovered that feminist models of empowerment are
incongruous with regard to ‘old’ old age. At first Morell focused only on the ‘strengths’ of
women in ‘old’ old age. However, she discovered that empowerment for older women needs to
be embodied because women, in late life experience living a life in which power and
vulnerability, strength and weakness co-exist. Morell also discovered that in order for
empowerment to become a reality for older women, death and disability need to be de-
stigmatized and viewed as life experiences that are acceptable and respectable.

Morell’s qualitative study is well written, thoughtful, reflective and liberating. Especially
informative and important are Morell’s conversations with four women in late life, because each
woman viewed being old as being rejected bodily. As well, Morell questions the idea of
‘successful aging’ because it focuses on the unacceptance of physical aging. As we age, it
becomes harder to control the body. Older women who are unable to control their bodies should
not be viewed as deficient or as someone to be feared, hated, or even ignored and hidden from
society.
In E. B. Ryan, D. E. Kennaley, M. W. Pratt, and M. R. Shumovich’s study (2000) two studies were undertaken to test the affect of different communication styles of the nursing staff and seniors’ in care homes and the nursing staff working with seniors still residing in the community. In these two studies, Ryan et al. used a ‘person perception paradigm’ (p. 4) to analyze responses to vignettes in which a member of the nursing staff began a conversation with ‘patronizing speech’ (“speech modifications based on old-age stereotypes of incompetence and dependency”) (p. 3) and a care home resident. The main interest was with regard to the senior’s behavior and the nurse’s response. In study 1, participants included 48 nursing home staff and 48 resident seniors (33 women and 15 men with an average age of 80 years). A questionnaire was created with two conversational scripts, one in which the nurse uses patronizing speech and one in which she uses a more accommodating style. Senior residents’ conversation was either, passive, assertive, or humorous. In study 2, participants included 48 community seniors, 49 care home seniors, and 48 care home staff. Study 2 reproduced the first study.

Ryan et al. found that in both studies the nurse’s more accommodating speech style was rated more positively. As well, elderly residents in nursing homes were more tolerant of nursing staff’s patronizing speech than were community seniors. Assertive seniors’ responses illuminated the nurse’s patronizing speech but were viewed by the seniors as rude and inappropriate. Passive seniors’ responses were seen as courteous but ineffective. Humorous seniors’ responses revealed potential for drawing on the positive elements of both assertive and passive responses.

This article is in-depth and original. Ryan et al. are clear about the limitation, for instance, that there was more control of the presentation of the conversations in study 2, and offer an insightful section regarding future research. Negative communication styles with older adults ties into the concept of alienation and how society allows the muting of their voices. As well, older women who are repeatedly subjected to patronizing communication may withdraw,
become invisible and/or feel rejected. Also, older women, themselves, can alienate their peers by communicating in a patronizing way toward them.

Societal Image of Older Women

In P. Higgs' article (1999) the quality of life among the elderly and the changing boundaries of old age are discussed. Higgs suggests that society, in general, still views aging and old age as irrefutably linked to illness, disability and poor quality of life. As well, Higgs suggests that social gerontologists who do research ‘see’ the elderly as ‘deficient.’ However, today, there is a move to view ‘quality of life’ in a broader light, rather than in a narrow, limiting way. Growing old is becoming a cultural reality rather than just a part of social policy such as retirement. Higgs argues that it is imperative that every aging individual, through his or her agentic self, needs to create an adequate quality of life. As well, more and more, older individuals are being seen by society as equal in the sense of making their own way and pulling their own weight. Higgs points out that “older people are increasingly like younger people with many of the same expectations” (p. 3). This sparks a concern with regard to the way society views aging. I wonder whether the older generation will have unreasonable expectations placed upon it by society with regard to quality of life? As well, will the call for more and more independence for the elderly blur their need for interdependence regarding family and community?

In K.A. Roberto, K.R. Allen, and R. Bliezner’s project (1999), gerontological and feminist structures were used in the exploration of relationships between older women, their adult children, and their grandchildren. In this qualitative study, Roberto et al. conducted rich, thickly detailed interviews with 34 women aged 55 to 88 years. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Based on multiple readings of the transcribed interviews and reflective research notes, themes were generated, and two major findings were highlighted: the significance of adult
children in older women’s lives and the supplemental importance of grandchildren in the lives of their grandmothers.

Roberto et al.'s qualitative study provides thick, rich description of the importance of intergenerational relationships and outstanding results and discussion. Roberto et al. are very aware of current extant literature. Many older women see themselves and their lives predominantly in terms of family and Roberto et al. point out that “relationships serve as sources of their happiness and despair” (p. 69). The relationships older women have with their adult children and grandchildren provide meaning in their lives. In true social constructionist fashion, these relationships are in flux, changing as all the generations continually move through life stages and transitions. This study illuminates the importance of respect, value and reverence toward older women for their ample contribution to family life rather than the blame and criticism that is directed toward too many of them by their adult children and even grandchildren.

In J. D. Garner’s article (1999), certain issues and events that are pertinent to older women are addressed from a feminist perspective. Garner suggests that older women have been judged by society through a narrow lens and have been found lacking. Garner points out that in North American society older women have been devalued, excluded from a productive life and are seen from a ‘deficiency’ perspective. Garner speaks to the invisibility of older women. Garner’s viewpoint is that Western society, and all of us are complicit in allowing this viewpoint to be entrenched, fears growing old and dying to such an extreme degree, that it excludes older women, and keeps their experiences ‘hidden’ and their voices muted. By isolating older women, Western society does not have to confront its fears and make positive changes regarding ageist and sexist assumptions. Garner, speaking from a feminist standpoint, passionately argues for society to embrace the intrinsic value of older women and points out that empowerment, a basic tenet of feminist theory and practice is critical to gerontology.
Garner eloquently speaks to the problems that women face as they age: negative stereotypes, limiting societal attitudes, and narrowing life roles. She calls for advocacy to help lessen these 'problems.' Especially pertinent is the idea of the loss of social value that women face as they age. The concept of empowering older women to work together collaboratively as a process towards exploration of their worth as human beings and gaining voice is crucial.

In S.M. Cummings, N.P. Kropf, and K.L. DeWeaver's study (2003), subjects aged 18 to 55 years are studied to determine their knowledge of and concerns with their own aging, gender and race. Using secondary data analysis, general knowledge of aging was measured by the Palmore Facts on Aging Quiz (FAQ) (Palmore, 1988) and the Kafer Anxiety Scale (KAS) (Kafer, Rakowski, Lachman, & Hickey, 1980), Cummings et al. found that women are more anxious about growing old than are men. As well, older women are more likely to live in poverty and face alienation and disability than are older men. Women are more often caregivers for the elderly than are men and this may account for their higher levels of anxiety regarding their own personal aging process.

Cummings et al.'s study is succinct and easily followed and understood. The authors offer a pertinent literature review as well as a great discussion and an awareness of the limitations of the study. They point out that additional research is needed on the correlations between certain variables and the measures used. This study advocates that older people as well as younger people are individuals and age differently. Society needs to seriously consider both the positive legacy of older women and their needs as they age. A balance between independence and interdependence is called for.

In S. Katz and B. Marshall's article (2003), the meeting point of consumer society and marketing and media's ability to recreate the concept of aging is explored. As the concept of positive aging (independence, integration, well-being, and social and emotional active engagement) is bought into by government agencies, and begins to replace 'negative' stereotypes
of aging as a process of decline, dependency, and uselessness, Katz and Marshall envision a culture of ‘ageless’ consumers and active participants. This ‘new aging’ is buoyant and effervescent. The authors zero in on two potentially dangerous issues: consumer ethics and its association with ‘choice,’ ‘risk management,’ and self-care in relation to the ‘ageless’ body and the way in which the ‘new sexuality’ has emerged as a main focal point for successful aging.

This is a very interesting and informative article that questions the viability of maintaining what Katz and Marshall refer to as a ‘posthuman body’ and ways of functioning as ‘ageless’ throughout the life course. Are older women experiencing life in a cultural context that asks the impossible ideal from them — to “live outside of time” (p. 10)? This article questions how empowerment is used — to oppress or to free. The authors are concerned that traditional resources of the elderly such as wisdom, storytelling, leadership, and ritual may be undermined in the modern culture of obsessive self-improvement.

In J. F. Gubrium and J. A. Holstein’s article (2003), a different perspective is looked at with regard to becoming older. The authors do not deny that older individuals share commonalities, however, they focus on diversity and the multiple experiences older people have within their cultural backdrops and life histories. They honor and elucidate the concept of multiple voices. Gubrium and Holstein illuminate how stereotypes limit aging as a process. They reveal the varied and multifaceted ways in which older people themselves experience being old, and how they derive meaning from the experience of aging. Gubrium and Holstein offer a hopeful picture of aging in direct opposition to the more common stereotypical view which is negative and focuses on deficiencies.

Gubrium and Holstein’s article is engaging, thoughtful, and uplifting. They offer a social constructionist perspective that argues for consideration of the experience of aging from a contextual viewpoint, especially in terms of biographical and cultural experiences. From this
social constructionist perspective, stereotypical views of the elderly as decrepit and useless give way to spaces of possibility for a hopeful, meaningful and engaging aging experience.

In J. A. Aquino, D. W. Russell, C. E. Cutrona and E. M. Altmaier's study (1996), a sample of community-living older individuals was studied to determine whether or not there is a positive correlation between paid or volunteer employment and life satisfaction and if perceived social support would lead to higher levels of life satisfaction. In this study, Aquino et al. interviewed 301 community-living participants, 65 years old and older of which 60% were women, over a 12 month period. Path analysis of collected data revealed three findings: there seems to be a relationship between paid or volunteer work and life satisfaction among the older population, volunteering increases older people's sense of being supported by the community and this increases life satisfaction, and there is a strong relation between life satisfaction and social support variables that was suggested by earlier studies.

This study is well-documented, rich in details, and aware of previous studies exploring the elderly, work, and life satisfaction. A key finding suggests that older people participating in paid or volunteer work may have a more positive level of life satisfaction. Important to counselling is the argument that interventions highlighting social support, may help the elderly to develop a broader view of possibilities for varied roles in their communities.

In J.S. Smith and M.M. Baltes' study (1998) older men and women were studied to discover whether or not both psychological and life functioning differences in men and women are gender related. In this study, Smith and Baltes questioned 258 men and 258 women, aged 70 to 103 years, who were participants in the 'Berlin Aging Study.' Data collection over 3 to 5 months was multidisciplinary. Using hierarchical regression and cluster analysis in this empirical study, Smith and Baltes found that the comparison of life contexts of older men and women involved in BASE showed significant differences on 13 of 28 constructs. Older women had a 1.6 times higher risk of a troublesome profile than older men had. Overall, men appear to
have more financial advantages and resources to cope with aging and, as well, they have more resources with which to compensate and optimize.

This is an intensive empirical study that speaks to the lack of empirical research with regard to gender differences in coping with the losses involved with aging. It is well-detailed, well-written, and cognizant of extant current research.

Successful Aging

In B. J. Fisher and D. K. Specht’s study (1999), the meanings older individuals assign to positive aging and how this relates to creativity were explored. In this study, Fisher and Specht interviewed thirty-six participants aged 60 to 93 years, who were contributors to an art exhibition. The collected qualitative data was coded, and content analysis illuminated six elements of positive aging: “a sense of purpose, interactions with others, personal growth, self-acceptance, autonomy and health” (p. 1). Creativity is key to aging successfully because it encourages the perception of life events as possibilities for personal growth.

This qualitative study is written in an engaging manner and presents wonderful quotations from the participants in the study. The responses of the participants fit well with the idea that life and creativity are processes rather than finished products. Successful aging is about creating spaces for possibility.

In R. J. Scheidt, D. R. Humpherys and J. B. Yorgason’s article (1999), the assumptions, model and its application of ‘successful aging’ as proposed by Rowe and Kahn (1998) are questioned. The author’s conclude that Rowe and Kahn’s definition of ‘successful aging,’ “an ability to maintain---low risk of disease and disease-related disability, high mental and physical functioning and active engagement with life” (p. 277) is problematic because it is static and does not allow for diversity among the elderly or changes in circumstances, context or environment. Most other models of positive aging speak to the necessity of balancing gains and losses in later
life and what that means and requires. Scheidt et al. are concerned that ‘successful aging’ as
defined by Rowe and Kahn is stereotypical and simplistic because it places limits on what
constitutes positive aging.

Scheidt et al. propose a more encompassing view of aging well. They advocate for the
exploration of the relationship between independence and interdependence on an individual level
rather than as a group given. This thoughtful article raises a lot of questions and highlights the
dangerous tendency to lump all members of a generation together whether from a ‘deficiency’
perspective or an ‘ageless’ perspective. The authors suggest that it is dangerous to place a value
judgement on aging, to suggest that active, independent aging is noble. This leaves one
wondering if aging that is interdependent and not necessarily active, is viewed as some how
diminished. In reality, not every aging individual has equal access to life events, circumstances,
and so forth that are conducive to aging positively.

In P. B. Baltes and M. M. Baltes’ article (1998), the good news about old age and the not
so good news about ‘old’ old age (eighty and onward or what Baltes & Baltes call the fourth age)
is explored and discussed. The authors present ideas on how, as we age, we may come to
successfully balance the route of gains and losses. Baltes and Baltes clearly state that there is a
gap in successful aging, psychologically and biologically. The authors state the importance of
emotional intelligence and wisdom in the so-called ‘third age’ (60 to 75 years). However, the
fourth age (80 years and up) presents problems because culture-based interventions such as
learning and social support are not efficient enough for this age group that has more
dysfunctionality and fewer positive emotions.

This article encompasses findings from research done by the Baltes and Baltes during the
past decade and provides compelling arguments regarding what can be accomplished by society
with regard to shifting the balance between gains and losses, especially in advanced old age.
Baltes and Baltes offer hope for the aging process and some outstanding examples of ways in which individuals, family members, communities and counselors can empower older people.

In F. R. Lang and L. L. Cartensen’s study (2002) an exploration was undertaken to examine the relationship between future time perspective and social motivation. As well, what personal networks looked like and the perception of their quality and whether they differed on age related differences in future time perspective was studied. In this study, Lang and Cartensen recruited 480 participants, aged 20 to 90 years. Using card-sort tasks and questionnaires, Lang and Cartensen examined relations between future time perspective, social goals and personal networks and discovered that when the future is seen as limited, participants downsize their personal networks and this provides greater social satisfaction and less social strain.

This study was straight forward and easily understood. The discussion section was excellent. Previously, the concept of ‘successful aging’ has been linked to greater social networking. However, Lang and Cartensen’s article lends credence to the idea that because older people see their future time as limited they want quality, not quantity in their social lives.

In M. Gergen and K. J. Gergen’s article (2003), focus is placed on the positive benefits that aging through the last third of life can bring. The authors stress how these positive benefits that may come with aging exist throughout the continuums of socioeconomic status and health. In this article, Gergen and Gergen, from a social constructionist standpoint, and acknowledging that there are multiple ways in which people age positively, relate a number of stories of people they consider to have aged positively. Gergen and Gergen discovered through hearing these stories that people who age positively do not focus on ‘decline’ and death. They consciously move toward “self-fulfillment, emotional interdependence and communal contribution” (p. 223). Gergen and Gergen concluded that by following any or all of the above three paths individuals may find pleasure and personal satisfaction, as well as becoming more acutely aware of how important life, time, and other people are.
Gergen and Gergen’s article is written from a social constructionist standpoint and shares life experiences of people, who, when facing or having faced life obstacles, still manage to maintain healthy positive outlooks on life and enjoy life. The idea of maintaining one’s ability to be useful is particularly important to the aging individual’s sense of self. The Gergens have a very active website and on-line journal called “Positive Aging.”

Older Women in Counselling

In E. Pfeiffer’s article (1999), basic rudiments of how to work effectively with older people are discussed. Pfeiffer describes 16 principles gleaned during his thirty-two years working in geriatrics that he feels anyone working with older individuals should be cognizant. Pfeiffer acknowledges that “the real experts on aging” (p. 4) are older people themselves. He stresses an interdisciplinary approach.

Pfeiffer’s article is outstanding because it deals head on with a huge gap in literature; older, frail people are indeed treatable, teachable, interdependent of their families, individually unique, engaging story tellers, and “are a sensitive barometer of what works and what doesn’t” (p. 12). Pfeiffer puts forward his rather unique belief that if something is good for older people, it will also be good for the younger generations. From a counselling standpoint we need to listen to our older clients and to be ready and willing to learn from them. Pfeiffer shows his respect for older people throughout the article. This article offers great insight and wisdom about the older generation. Pfeiffer provides crucial hands-on information for counsellors with regard to working with the elderly.

In S.H. Qualls’ article (2000), the importance of the integral role of family in the lives of the elderly is reiterated. As well, Qualls explores the concept of families as a site of intervention for older adults. This concept is rarely seen as relevant to the elderly. Qualls’ paper has a two-fold purpose: to provide a line of argument for family counselling for the elderly and to
comment on challenges to and further direction for family counselling research regarding older adults.

Qualls’ article is a step forward in filling a gap in the literature with regard to the elderly and their paucity in counselling, especially family counselling. As well, Qualls clearly elucidates the crucial importance that the family serves as the social core for older adults. The support the family provides, “is a key variable predicting well being in older persons” (p. 2). If older women do not have strong family support systems, their health and emotional well-being may be compromised.

In N. K. Schlossberg’s article (1990), key elements that should be included in the training of counselors who work with older adults are discussed. These include a viewpoint on aging, “a transition, life-events framework for counselling,’ (p. 2) and the ability to teach older adults coping skills. Schlossberg stresses that there is great diversity and variability in the ways in which older individual’s age. She also claims that most of the literature on aging stereotypes the older generation as a common, definable group. The concept of diversity in the aging process among the elderly, needs to be integrated into a training program for counsellors. Counsellors need to be trained to help clients understand how transitions impact older individual’s lives over a period of time.

Schlossberg advocates developing workshops for older populations to teach people how to cope more effectively with life crises and transitions. Older people, more than any other age group, do not seek or receive counselling, so Schlossberg recommends taking the workshops to senior’s centers and care homes. Workshops are effective vehicles for helping the older generation become aware of the process of change and loss and for empowering them to overcome change. This is a great article that advocates a hands-on approach to counselling by modeling a proactive approach by going to the group that needs to learn to be agentic (to help
themselves) and through work shopping, living reciprocity, and teaching coping skills, the group (in this case, older individuals) can teach others.

In M.J. Florsheim and J.J. Herr's article (1990), the process of doing family counselling with older adults is discussed. Florsheim and Herr suggest that “the family, despite all of the social changes that have surrounded it, often serves as the primary source of emotional and physical support for older adults” (p. 40). The authors present some examples from the literature that support the notion of the importance of the family system to the well-being of older individuals.

Too often the elderly relative is viewed as ‘the problem’ by the family, so counselors who work with the older generation need to be skillful in inviting other family members to join in the counselling sessions. Another issue that older people tend to feel uneasy about is actually going to counselling and ‘airing’ their problems in front of others. Members of the oldest generation grew up in a more stoical environment where going to counselling or getting help was seen as a weakness of character or a lack of strength or a sign that one has mental problems. A positive way to approach this concern may be to present counselling sessions as family meetings. Florsheim and Herr advocate using groups to teach older clients problem-solving skills. Counsellors need to be creative, flexible, and accommodating when working with older individuals and their families.

Summary of Chapter Two

Alienation and invisibility, Western society’s image of older women, the meaning of successful aging, and the paucity of older women in counselling are the four main areas that I focused on in my literature review. The literature definitely speaks to the disturbing fact that the elderly are excluded from much of mainstream society and either ignored, or through the practice of ageist discrimination, are ‘not seen’ and ‘not really heard’ by younger generations. Western
society tends to view the elderly, and elderly women in particular, in limiting and stigmatizing ways. Instead of valuing and learning from the journey of aging and older people themselves, Western society fears the aging process and views it negatively. The idea of ‘successful aging,’ as theorized by Rowe and Kahn in the mid-nineteen-nineties, may, in some cases, hinder the lives of older women. Within the model of ‘successful aging,’ death and disability need to be destigmatized and viewed as acceptable and respectable – a natural part of living. Finally, older women are underrepresented in counselling because some counselors are uncomfortable working with the older population and because older women may see going to counselling as an indication that they are weak.

There is a scarcity of research literature with regard to older women. Older women are underrepresented in counselling, because of counsellors’ gerontophobia and lack of training in working with our elders. As well, there is a lack of specific counseling interventions for older women. Literature suggests that older women benefit from and prefer to work in groups; they seek connection to others. They need a balance between independence and interdependence. Performing ethnography with older women is a new, unique research design for older women and it is both collaborative and reciprocal. The process of ethnoperformance provides ample opportunities for the potential for voice and connection to others. Performance ethnography brings to light everyone’s complicity in contributing to ageism.
CHAPTER THREE
Research and Method

The research design for this study is qualitative. Qualitative research looks to the meaning of lived experience and situates itself in the participant’s naturalistic setting. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) broadly define qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 3), a site of lived experience. Furthermore, qualitative research “---consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible---these practices transform the world” (Denzin and Lincoln, p. 3). According to Denzin and Lincoln, “we can know a thing only through its representations” (p. 5) therefore, qualitative research incorporates a multiplicity of methods in order to generate thick, rich, detailed and descriptive information.

Given my question (“How do older women narrate their experience of creating voice through ethnoperformance?”), this study warrants an ethnoperformance which is a type of performance text that is a genre within interpretive/critical ethnography. Denzin (1997) sees ethnoperformance as “culture as a performance – as theater” (p. 91). Through the process of ethnoperformance, the lived experience that was invisible becomes visible. Denzin in, Denzin & and Lincoln (2003) states that:

We inhabit a performance-based, dramaturgical culture. The dividing line between performer and audience blurs, and culture itself becomes a dramatic performance...The meanings of lived experience are inscribed and sometimes made visible in these performances. (pp. 467-468)

The ethnographer’s inquiry is straightforward: “Find out the typical ways of thinking and feeling, corresponding to the institutions and culture of a given community and formulate the results in the most convincing way” (Malinowski (1922/1961, cited in Denzin, 1997, pp. xv-xvi). Performance ethnographies “are about the present moment and seek to give the text back to the
readers and informants in the recognition that we are all co-performers in each other’s lives---it seeks to perform research findings in a language and code accessible to its wide audiences” (Mienczakowski, 2001, p. 468).

History of Ethnography

The Evolution of Ethnography

Ethnography has a long and storied history, at times extremely controversial. Throughout the past two centuries ethnography has evolved through five pathways: traditional ethnography, institutional ethnography, local ethnography, critical/interpretive ethnography, and radical/poststructural ethnography. Early ethnography, approximately 1870 to the 1920s is known as ‘traditional’ ethnography and involved anthropologists studying ‘natives.’ During this time, there was a tendency among ‘ethnographers’ to absorb within themselves aspects of the culture’s point of view. Malinowski (1922) cited in Denzin & Lincoln (2000) “suggested that the ethnographer’s goal should be to grasp the ‘native’s point of view” (p. 457). Denzin and Lincoln credit Malinkowski with illuminating ‘fieldwork’ as the foundation for ethnography.

During the 1950s institutional ethnography came into being. Ethnographers began to study the rules, documents, politics and power of institutions. Vidich and Lyman in Denzin and Lincoln (2003) mention the role of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Smithsonian Institution in representing Indian cultures: “---ceremonies recorded, kinship systems mapped, technology described, artifacts collected – all carried out from a secular and administrative point of view” (p. 69).

Local ethnography became popular in the 1960s and dwelled on the study of group process. Vidich and Lyman state that, Park (1925/1967) “conceived the city to be a social laboratory containing a diversity and heterogeneity of peoples, lifestyles, and competing and contrasting worldviews” (cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 75). Street corner society became
a focus of study. As well, ethnographers became interested in the study of deviant group processes such as Aryan race groups.

With the growth of social constructivism, and the embracing of partial truth, subjectivism, flux, change, and multiple truths, during the past three decades, critical/interpretive ethnography, with its focus on studying power, and those who have been silenced and marginalized, has emerged as a potent method of research. Marcus (1994) calls the path of interpretive ethnography a “period of intense reflection, ‘messy texts’” (cited in Denzin, 1997, p. xvii). ‘Messy texts’ take place in multiple sites, make the researcher part of the study, and gather together multiple voices from multiple perspectives in order that multiple interpretations can be constructed from them. Editors, Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland and Lofland (Eds., 2001) agree that “the multiplicity of perspectives and practices in contemporary ethnography are not in doubt” (p. 3). Denzin informs us that ‘messy texts’ “are often grounded in the study of epiphanal moments in people’s lives…the focus is on those events, narratives, and stories people tell one another as they attempt to make sense of the epiphanies or existential turning-point moments in their lives” (p. xvii). Interpretive ethnography is action research that occurs at sites of action that open up the space for insight and change. This is where I situate my performance ethnography.

Denzin (1997) quotes Clough (1995, p.534) when questioning the identity of ethnographers in the postmodern world as it veers toward poststructuralism:

Who must ethnographers be in postmodernity, when science is understood as a primary agency of power/knowledge and when computer simulation and the televisual, more than the novel or even film, give shape to the social? (p. 250)

Denzin (1997) views the sixth moment of interpretive ethnography as being “transformed into public-journalism-as-ethnography” (p. 281). It will merge with action research, public journalism and interpretive ethnography situated within what Denzin (274) calls a “feminist,
communitarian ethical model,” a model within which, as Lincoln (cited in Denzin, 1997) acknowledges, “relationality is the major characteristic of research that is neighborly...and rooted in community, shared governance...and neighborliness” (p. 275).

Radical/poststructural ethnography is emancipatory and participatory; it is the ‘sixth moment’ of interpretive ethnography. According to Pinar, et al. (1995, p. 450):

Contrary to structuralism, poststructural curricula “challenge and subvert not only the central themes, organizing metaphors, and discursive strategies constituting Western thought and informing the Enlightenment project, but all that is modernism itself, including those perspectives and culture structures associated with modernism (cited in Garoian, 1999, p. 135).

Method

Ethnoperformance

The rethinking of ethnography is primarily about speaking and listening, instead of observing...[this] shifts the emphasis from space to time, from sight and vision to sound and voice, from text to performance, from authority to vulnerability.


Given my question, “How do older women narrate their experience of creating voice through ethnoperformance?” this study warrants an ethnoperformance. Denzin (1997, p. 91) envisions ethnoperformance as “culture as a performance – as theater.” The performance ethnography evolves through a process including interviews, researcher and participant journaling, workshopping, performing and discussing.

Performing ethnography is a fairly new journey. It is really only during the past two decades that performance ethnography has become a noticeable and viable means of illuminating
interpretive ethnography. Victor Turner, in 1986, first called “for research that also participated in performance—the worlds of theatre and research at that time were too far apart for a viable elision between the aesthetic assumptions of performance and the methodological and theoretical ambitions of research to truly take place” (Mienczakowski, 2001, 468). In 1992, Mienczakowski co-constructed a performance ethnography that brought to light the experience of living with schizophrenia that was representative of the informant’s experiences and provided a space for the coming together of informants, audience and researcher to discuss and debate the meaning of that experience.

Performance ethnography is a ‘genre within ethnography.’ Denzin points out that performance ethnography takes on different names according to who wears it-Mienczakowski calls it ‘ethnodrama,’ V. Turner views it as ‘instructional theater,’ Bruner names it as ‘performing culture,’ Garoian illuminates it as ‘performing pedagogy,’ and Paget dubs it ‘ethnoperformance.’ ‘Messy’ performance ethnographies “exist in what Conquergood (1992) calls “the borderlands” (p. 80), the spaces where rhetoric, performance, ethnography, and cultural studies come together” Denzin, (p. 91) or in what Fels (1998, p. 30) refers to as “the edge of chaos.”

Ethnoperformances offer embodied action, drama, narration, multiple voices, and multiple perspectives. One of the rationales for performance ethnography, according to Mienczakowski, (2001) is that “performed ethnography may provide more accessible and clearer public explanations of research than is frequently the case with traditional, written report texts” (471). Ethnoperformances situate the ‘lived experience’ of the participants in the present- the here and now. The goal of ethnographic performances is to present, through performance, research discoveries in a communicative manner that is accessible to a wide array of audiences. Mienczakowski sees great meaningfulness in the potential that performance ethnography has to return “the ownership, and therefore the power, of the report to its informants as opposed to
possessing it on behalf of the academy” (p. 471). In a collaborative social constructivist fashion, ethnoperformances are consensually constructed between participants, researcher and audiences. Ultimately, it is the participants/informants who control “the text and representations made” (Mienczakowski, p. 468).

Performance ethnographies intend to overtly be a “form of public voice ethnography that has emancipatory and educational potential” (Mienczakowski, p. 469). They have the potential to be powerful educational tools for awareness, understanding, insight and, hopefully, change. The potential of ethnoperformances to ensure people voice is strongly related to the processes of validation and reflexivity that take place throughout the entire collaborative research process. They are never ‘finished.’ Because performances of ethnography are collaborative, co-consensual representations of the lived experiences of a cultural, they are always subject to change and amendment. Mienczakowski (2001, p. 470) sums up the significance of performance ethnography when he states:

Ethnodrama sits within an extant school of theatre which searches for social change (Epskamp, 1989) but differs from other forms of similar theatre in that it adheres to the principles of a formal and recognizable ethnographic research methodology, above and beyond the artistic demands of aesthetics, in its attempt to produce cultural critique (Denzin, 1997).

Research Procedures

Sample Description

The ethnoperformance research process involved five female participants aged seventy years and older. Each participant had an experience(s) of lacking voice that has had a profound
affect on her. Each participant was physically, mentally and emotionally (this did not exclude women with physical handicaps or chronic health conditions, as long as they had the endurance to be involved in the process) able to participate in visualization/drama/role/improvisational activities for a period of three months. As well, each participant was willing to commit to the ethnoperformance process.

Reruitment Procedures

Participant’s were recruited from senior’s centers and/or senior’s gathering places, mainly because getting their consent might have been more difficult if they were in care facilities (which, in itself, might have been an instance of being denied voice). I created and constructed a poster/video presentation that outlined the ‘scope’ of the study and provided ‘real’ examples of older women’s narration of their experiences of lacking voice. I brought this presentation to various senior’s centers and senior’s gathering places. After the presentation, I invited the women to enter into a discussion with me with regard to any questions, concerns or thoughts they might have had with regard to the study. I then conducted an initial conversational interview with interested older women to determine which ones had ‘the experience’ and were committed to the process of the study.

Research Procedures

Beginning with first workshop, the entire process of the evolution of the ethnoperformance was videotaped.

Interviews

Being qualitative in nature, unstructured conversational interviews opened up space for establishing rapport and trust, and, in the view of Fontana and Frey (cited in Denzin & Lincoln,
2003), the potential for gathering rich, detailed, descriptive information or data. The conversational interview was unstructured and was approximately one to two hours in duration. The goal of this interview was to find the most appropriate (deeply affected by the experience of lacking voice and committed to work collaboratively to construct and perform their experiences) five women to become participants in the study. As well, this interview further provided an opportunity for establishing rapport and building trust.

I adhered to the belief of Fontana and Frey and Lofland (1971) (cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) that ethnographic interviewing and participant observation were inseparable: “the two go hand in hand---” (p. 74). I saw the conversational interview as having the potential to provide the thick, rich data that illuminated each woman’s experience of lacking voice and provided the information for all of the following research procedures. Postmodern interviewing building upon the foundation of social constructivism, has created less intrusive ways of conducting interviews “in the hope of minimizing, if not eliminating, interviewer influence” (Fontana and Frey in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 81). I used Jack Douglas’s (1985) tool of “creative interviewing” (Fontana and Frey in Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 80), which focused on the collection of participant’s narratives or stories in an atmosphere in which both the interviewer and the interviewing were creative, ‘how-to-rules’ were ignored, and the researchers “adapt themselves to the ever-changing situations they face” (p.80).

Interwoven with ‘creative interviewing’ was what Denzin (1989a) called ‘interpretive interactionism’ which added “a new element, that of epiphanies---those interactional moments that leave marks on people’s lives [and] have the potential for creating transformational experiences for the person” (Fontana and Frey cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 81). ‘Interpretive interactionism’ as a deeper way of interviewing was a tight fit with performance ethnography because “the topic of inquiry becomes dramatized by the focus on existential
moments in people’s lives, hopefully producing richer and more meaningful data” (Fontana and Frey cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 81).

**Journals**

In order to voice their feelings, ideas, and thoughts, both the participants and the researcher journaled. Journaling was a space within which both participants and researcher were able to reflect on what their experiences of the process meant to them, and potentially come to awareness, perhaps insight, maybe even what Taylor & Saarinen (cited in Fels, 1998) called ‘interstanding.’ Clandinin and Connelly in (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994), referred to journal writing as “a powerful way for individuals to give accounts of their experience…” (p. 421). The journal reflections became experiential, reflected upon, material/data for the ethnoperformance.

**Workshops**

A series of weekly, two hour workshops were conducted, collaborated upon and co-constructed by the researcher and the participants. Through these workshops, participants and researcher created the ever-changing pieces to the puzzle of the performance text. These pieces were ‘in flux;’ they were ever-changing and always in the process of ‘becoming.’ They were never finished. Thus the ethnoperformance was also ever-evolving. The workshops began with fifteen minutes allotted for journal writing and ended with a minimum of twenty minutes for debriefing and discussion. Integral to the workshop process was enough time allowed for discussion during and after each session. It was in this space of honest, courageous opening up of oneself to each other that the potential for ‘interstanding’ and transformation existed.

Ideas, thoughts, feelings, themes, and ‘epiphanies’ that were illuminated in the conversational interview and in the journals were explored collaboratively through performative inquiry. Fels (cited in Brauer, 2002) envisioned performative inquiry as inviting “the co-evolving world(s) of performance, interpretation, complexity, and cognition into a transformative dance of possibility” (p. 10). Performative inquiry regenerated a thick data collection through
the collaborative exploration of participant reflections using drama activities such as visualization, sculpting, tableaux, improvisation, role play and performative writing. Performative inquiry and ethnoperformance were inseparable. The workshops, utilizing performative inquiry, also had the goal of creating space and possibility for the attainment of agency. Participants were offered an environment within which they learned to challenge authority that is disempowering.

I agreed with Fels & Meyer (1997, p. 80) when they stated that rich, deep learning comes into being through "doing, knowing, talking and creating." I envisioned the workshops as opportunities to create spaces of disequilibrium in which the deep, rich learning could root in action sites of "inquiry and revolution" (Fels, 1998, p. 33) wherein trusting, letting go (what Fels called 'freefall') and embodied play evolved naturally. The series of workshops, and specifically, the drama activities "...became powerful methods for muting or evoking 'the sounds of silence'" (Fels & Meyer, 1997, p. 77).

Because my participants had all experienced lacking voice, performative inquiry was a rich combination of play and exploration towards the building of a clear, strong, and empathic voice. I believed that by performing inquiry in the workshops, possibility was born of embracing what Barone and Eisner (1997) saw as the overarching question in arts based educational research, and what I viewed as equally important in counselling research, "...whether the work advances understanding, whether it illuminates important qualities, whether it deepens our comprehension of the factors, forces and conditions that animate human beings" (p. 89). This study/journey embodied a deeply reflexive process and Garoian (1999, p. 9) stated loudly and clearly that performance art pedagogy had an innately reflexive character when he proposed that:

The reflexive character of performance pedagogy is a three-layered process.

First, as a process of objectification, the critique of performance art enables students to see the culture that they embody and to expose and problematize
its hidden circumstances. Second, as a process of subjectification, it enables them to see themselves within culture by critiquing it from the perspective of personal memory and cultural history. Third, it provides them an opportunity to see their performances within the expanded field of cultural history.

Debriefing/Discussion

In November, 2003, I witnessed and was complicit in a forum theater presentation at the artful salon in the education (EDCI) department of UBC. Years of teaching theater in high school and being an audience member in numerous theater presentations with audience participation and discussion had not elicited from me the ‘aha’ moment that I experienced with Lynn Fels and my classmates in an insightful discussion after the forum theater presentation. I believed that ‘discussion/debate’ is crucial to ethnoperformance. However, discussion will never have the potential to be a transformative conduit in the lives of people if it is not carried out in a safe environment where honest, respectful questioning and deep self-examination is nurtured, where listening is valued, and where risk taking is encouraged. In such a space, the mind and heart can be opened to insightful reflection.

Too often the ‘art’ of discussion was diminished by a hurried, glossed over debriefing that, somehow, didn’t reach the heart of the reason for the performance. I embraced the healing process of the kind of discussion that connected people in their desire to come to ‘interstanding.’ I was convinced that discussion couldn’t be rushed; it must be savored. The process of discussion that I craved created a space for the possibility of ‘interstanding,’ multiple perspectives and voices, for connection, for risk-taking, for voice, for listening, for ‘aha’ moments, for profound, inspirational learning and for the discovery of hopefulness.
Data Management

Collected data was stored in a separate, lockable filing cabinet. Each participant and the researcher had a different file color assigned to them. Each participant was assured anonymity by having a specific code for their name. Journals, whether written or audio taped were kept in the filing cabinet. Videos were designated either ‘individual’ or ‘group’ with the date and the name of the workshop. All notes, audio and/or videotapes were stored in each participant’s file folder and/or file box.

Data Analysis Procedures

In a true collaborative fashion, data gathered during the collection phase was returned to individual participants and groups of participants for comment and amendment. With interpretive/critical ethnography, performance ethnography, and performative inquiry, collaboration occurred throughout the entire process of collection, analysis, performative inquiry and discussion.

In this study, Dr. Marla Arvay’s whole story (wholistic) and content narrative analysis method (1998) was appropriate as an effective way for the researcher to read and analyze the life story/experience(s) data. As the researcher, I did interpretive readings of each of the participants’ narratives and shared my interpretations with them. I watched the videotapes of each workshop four times for four different interpretive readings. During the first reading of the videotape, I wrote out, word for word, what the participants and researcher said and included what each person did. In essence, I scripted each workshop. Basically, I looked for what the content was, what the participants were saying and what the stories of narrating were. The second time I watched the videotapes of each workshop, I looked for the ways in which the participants were storying. I looked for who they were as narrators and how they ‘did’ their stories. I used a different colored pen for this interpretive reading. The third watching of the
workshop videotapes was to discover how the data answered the research question. Again, I used a different colored pen. The fourth and final interpretive watching/reading of the workshop videos was to discover what the critical discourse was. At this point, I stepped aside and looked at the data with a critical lens. I interpreted the discourse around the elderly. I explored where/what/how was the silence/oppression. I discovered what familial roles/rules society placed on the elderly. I also used a different colored pen for this interpretation.

After collaboratively (re) negotiating the participants’ stories, the researcher wrote up a thematic analysis and articulated key critical issues. The data analysis focused on three facets: the participants’ individual stories, the ethnoperformative group process and group stories. The role of the researcher as ‘author’ was significantly reduced in favor of what Mienczakowski (1996, p. 256) called a “multivoiced, validated narrative constructed from the agenda and experiences...” of older women who publicly narrated their stories of lacking voice.

Criteria for the Worth of the Study

Criteria for the worth of this study (rigor) was determined by the following three factors: resonance, pragmatic value and thick description.

Resonance

In this particular case, resonance included both participant and group validation (participant member checks and group checks). Did the performance text resonate? Did the participants recognize the genuineness of the performance experience? Was the audience ‘moved’ by the performance? Was there the potential to transform, through awareness, understanding, insight and meaning, both group and participants? Did the participants as audience ‘come to know’ some of the feelings that they had both witnessed and been complicit in maintaining, as if they, themselves, had experienced them?
Pragmatic Value

Pragmatic value asked whether reciprocity, (a mutual give and take) had come to fruition during the research process. What did the ethnoperformance offer back to the participants, and how did it change their lives? Was a space for ‘possibility’ opened up? Was there the potential to transform, through awareness, understanding, interstanding, insight and meaning, both participants and ‘spectactors'? Ensuring pragmatic value also included participant/member checks and whole group checks.

Thick Description

Thick description was a layer of deep reflexivity and a first person account that revealed the emotionality (depth of emotional coloring) and multiple voices and perspectives interwoven through the ethnoperformance. The foundation stone for validity in performance ethnography was an account that was built in collaboration with the participants. Barone and Eisner (1997) spoke to the importance of ‘perceptivity,’ in arts-based educational research. Perceptivity generated itself through thick, rich detail and description, especially through “seeing what most people miss” (p. 93). Transferability was crucial in ethnoperformance. Did the rich, thick description allow the group audience a more profound experience by moving them to transfer the experience(s) that they had embodied to other settings, situations and life experiences? Multiple methods and procedures such as interviews, journals, workshops, and discussions ensured a greater depth of interpretation and richer details. As well, multiple sources and voices were involved in the study: member checks, length of time spent with participants in the field, reflexivity through, journaling and discussions, as well as group and peer feedback.

In ethnoperformance, validity was not consciously strived for. However, throughout the process of the ethnoperformance, there were ongoing participant response checks. This was essential to the collaborative process. The researcher asked the participants whether she had gotten close to their criterion or their experience of lacking voice. As well, throughout the
process of co-constructing the performance ethnography, there were peer checks by committee members or other experts in the field.

Clarifying researcher bias was also important in ensuring validity. Some sense of validity was achieved during data analysis. The triangulation of data using sources such as participant and group feedback, personal reflection (journaling), feedback from other researchers, and attending to the social and ethical implications of the study aided in creating a valid performance ethnography.

Significance of the Study to Counselling

The performance ethnography provided information and awareness with regard to the lack of agency and empowerment among an important segment of Western society that is underrepresented in literature and in counselling: older women. This study was necessary because it contributed to the fields of counselling and gerontology by showing engaging and embodied ways in which older women can (re) discover their 'voices' and by showing older women in a proactive light rather than from a 'deficiency' outlook. This study highlighted the fact that in a society driven by the desire to remain 'young' the attitudes toward older women range from irritation to disrespect to disgust to fear. Counsellors, themselves, were not immune to these attitudes.

The ethnoperformance was a participatory tool that for counselling purposes will create opportunities for awareness, understanding/interstanding, insight and change for all segments of society (even counsellors) by creating a space for them to experience their complicity in contributing to silencing voice in older women.

This study illuminated interventions, including agency, efficacy, assertiveness, confidence, and so forth. By working with older women in meaningful ways that allow them an agentic identity, counselors may be staving off the anxiety, depression and lack of self-esteem
that literature suggests inflicts older women at a higher rate than is seen in older men and younger generations. Empowering older women to find and hold on to a meaningful sense of purpose, which allows them a balance between independence and interdependence and encourages them to effectively resist and challenge oppression, may go a long way toward positive emotional, mental, and physical health.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher always needed to be aware that she may be dealing with a more vulnerable segment of society when she works with elderly women. Flexibility and patience were key qualities during the ethnoperformance process because they are crucial qualities needed when working with the older generation.

It was incumbent upon the researcher that she ensured participants would be ‘left with something’ after the study. By using resonance and pragmatic value as criteria for evaluating the ‘rigor’ of the study, the researcher attained a high level of reciprocity. As well, because the study involved the participants at a deep level of involvement for a lengthy period of time, the researcher needed to ensure that participants and, perhaps researcher continued to meet periodically as a group to ‘have fun,’ after the study was completed.

Performance ethnography was a collaborative process, thus, the researcher needed to be aware of how easy it might be to ‘influence’ participants. Member checks and peer checks helped address the tendency to influence.

The researcher believed that, overall, Western society devalues, neglects and disrespects older women. This was a strong bias that was tempered by researcher journaling and memoing.

Confidentiality would be difficult to maintain once the participants performed the ethnoperformance for audiences. The researcher might have to consider using other women for the performances.
Finally, I took to heart the wisdom of McLeod’s (2001) powerful words: It is the willingness to enter fully into a process of inquiry, a willingness to draw upon (or risk) one’s integrity as a person, that gives the best qualitative research its ‘edge.’ (p. 10)

Writing it Up (Representation of the Findings)

The ethnoperformance was an ethnographically derived performative inquiry that was an enactment of the descriptions of the participants’ experiences: for example, the experience of being ‘muted.’ Performance ethnography evolved from the remembered experiences and workshop pieces, as lived by the participants and the researcher. These ‘lived experiences,’ descriptions, movements and stories were repeatedly confirmed by the participants as truthful representations of their experiences.

The performance ethnography process was videotaped, but it was never finished or completed, and thus, was not a conventional report. During the workshop process, participants and researcher were interweaving choreography, speaking, singing, noise making, and movement with monologues, dialogues, sculpture, choral moments, tableaux, improvisation, guided role play and so forth. The participants ‘lived’ their experiences through telling and performing.

The ethnoperformance process was based on a consensus of communication. The performative inquiry evolved and changed. The participants determined the direction the work took and how deep they were willing to venture forth into those ‘borderlands. The group as audience/spectators, as well as each individual participant, and the researcher were complicit in the performance ethnography. By creating a space for ‘possibility,’ performative inquiry encouraged voices to be heard.
Possible Limitations of the Study

The study may limit itself because it might be too involved, too lengthy and too ambitious in scope. With regard to the participants, their age itself may have limited the study because they may have suffered ill health, lacked endurance to finish the study, be timid or fearful, become forgetful with regard to performing and become too dependent on the researcher for support and help. With regard to the researcher, she may have become too involved in the lives of the participants. The researcher’s passion for the study may have created too much of a personal agenda.
CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Violet: It’s okay to be over seventy. I didn’t think it was at one time. But the older you get, you forget what’s over the river or what’s behind the river. As long as you, as long as you just be happy in yourself. Not worried about anything. Just let it go.

Restatement of Purpose

The purpose of my study was to uncover ways in which older women narrate their experience(s) of creating voice through the process of ethnoperformance in order to create and construct a reflexive teaching/counselling tool. I envisioned two potential outcomes that the study had the possibility of discovering. The first potential outcome would be to create awareness and understanding of older women’s experience of lacking voice in order to allow for meaningful, empathic, reciprocal and, perhaps even transforming connections to members of all generations. The second potential outcome would be to give voice to/empower participants as they live the process of constructing, reconstructing and performing their stories of being muted or silenced. This process evolved through ethnoperformance: collaboration, creating a safe environment, performative inquiry and debriefing/discussion. An important goal of the ethnoperformance was to move participants and researcher, both individually, and as a group, toward into spaces for the illumination of awareness, insight, agency, voice, empowerment and efficacy.

Analysis

As stated in chapter three, I did four intensive interpretive viewings/readings of the videoed workshops, incorporating Dr. Marla Arvay’s whole story (wholistic) and content
narrative analysis method (1998). This included my own observations, reflections and interpretations of the videoed workshops to explore and uncover (make visible) the culture of women over seventy (the stories they narrate in common). Freeman, (2000, pp. 359-360) described how the process of ethnography created the visibility of a culture.

Ethnography is said to be “the art and science of describing a group or culture” (Fetterman, 1998, p. 1), in which culture is often referred to as some knowledge more or less shared by a given group. This knowledge “is said to inform, embed shape, and account for the routine and not-so-routine activities of the members of the culture” (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 3). It is, however, not itself readily apparent in the acts and words of the people under scrutiny. Rather, culture becomes visible through the ethnographer’s interpretations and representations (Van Maanen, 1988).

During the first viewing/reading, I scripted the videotaped workshop and looked for content. The second viewing/reading consisted of the interpretive exploration for the identity of each narrator. The third viewing/reading was for the struggle of the narrator (the research question). The fourth viewing/reading was a critical reading to discover where/how/what was the silence or oppression, what were the familial roles that society placed on the elderly and what was the discourse around the elderly. This wholistic analysis process revealed five individual participant stories, how the group process of ethnoperformance evolves and empowers the participants and six compelling group stories.

Chapter four will focus on what was discovered during the research study from the five individual stories that were told by the participants, the group process of ethnoperformance, how voice was created through ethnoperformance and the six group stories that the participants narrated in common. As well, the chapter will review the researcher’s role and discuss how the study process created reciprocity for the participants.
Five Individual Stories

I know already that I have connected with the women of experience. I know that I will be open to what they have the potential of teaching me. I hope I can garner their respect; they have already garnered mine!!

Their life stories tell me that they are indomitable...

Tuesday, March 16, 2004 (Marianna’s journal)

My research study, which explored how older women narrated their experience(s) of creating voice through ethnoperformance, focused on five unique women (participants): Violet, Ida, Dana, Laara and Ahmadnia. At seventy-one years of age, Ahmadnia was the youngest participant; at eighty-nine years of age, Violet was the oldest participant. This section of the results chapter will reveal the diversity of the participants. It will illuminate their individual, unique stories. Violet, Ida, Dana, Laara and Ahmadnia all had the distinction of being older women, but the term ‘old’ as viewed by Western society cannot even begin to describe who each one of these women was. While each participant embraced the age she was, each participant also bemoaned the fact that too many people heard or saw the label ‘old’ and could not see deeper. Society appeared to be blindfolded by fear of aging and dying and by preconceived notions that older women were just that - old.

In general, society viewed older women as ‘over the hill.’ Ahmadnia, herself, declared, “We are finished,” in reference to her belief that because society focused on the smaller amount of time that the older generation had left to live, it undervalued the wisdom of the older generation and, thus, older women had little power to change the course of events. The following individual participant stories were a testimony to the generative power of each woman.

What is the importance of names? Throughout the research study process, Ahmadnia, Laara, Dana, Ida and Violet storied pride in their names, both their birth names and their pseudonyms. When they performed their names, they were confident. When they performed their names, they were empowered. When they performed their names their bodies became
involved through facial expressions, gesturing, breath rhythms, moving and posturing. Why?


Names become us – our bodies, our faces, our voices, our expressions seem to capture our names, to make them almost essential parts of us. Names have this power – they grow in symbolic power until our bodies and our names become indistinguishable...what’s in a name? Names don’t simply hold or identify power; they are power.

This section of the results chapter tells the story of each of the five participants. Each story will begin with the participant’s ‘I Am’ performative work from workshop four. This will be followed by the analogy or metaphor that they coined for themselves near the end of workshop six. The majority of each participant’s story will consist of narratives from the interviews and workshops and the researcher’s interpretation of these narratives.

Ahmadnia’s Story

‘I Am’ Performance

My name is Ahmadnia. I am seventy-one. I love respect, forgiveness, sharing with people, being loyal and seeing loyalty from the people helping. I love to forgive and have forgiveness from the people. Promises are very important to me. And I love to visit the people who respect their promises...I am a caring person, unfortunately I don’t like always caring...about the people...What about, What about me? I love some people care about me too. Especially my family. My daughter is too busy (shows the group her journal). Is not written here (laughs). And she has no time to care about me. That is really unfortunate.

Okey Doke. I have a lot of fear that what will happen to me when I get older. Because I am not a healthy person. And I have a lot of fear if I lose some loved one.
And this is the most fear that I have. I am almost happy...I like see that my daughter’s life be better and better and that she will be healthier and healthier. I love that around the world there be peace and everybody live peaceful. And the life of the people be better and they can handle their life. I am an independent person and I like this about me. I love my friends, but unfortunately here, I have maybe only a good friend. That’s all.

Ahmadnia’s ‘I Am’ performance revealed the many ways of being that Ahmadnia narrated during the course of the research study. It breathed her pride in herself and her pride and longing to communicate what mattered to her. As part of the group, as an audience member, I felt her longing to not just be the one that loves but to also be the one that is shown love. Her passion made itself known, as did her vulnerability. We felt her pain. We sensed her humor. Ahmadnia performed her expectations of herself and others.

Near the end of workshop six, during our final discussion, I asked the women to reflect on an analogy or metaphor that symbolized them. I was prepared to give them time to think about what they would say, but once again they surprised me. They knew immediately what they would say, without hesitation. Ahmadnia performed her analogy with passion. Throughout the research process, her stories were experiences of emotional coloring and vibrancy, of heart and soul. Sometimes her dance became so fast, she forgot to pace herself. Sometimes her dance was so passionate, so emotionally charged, that she was moved not to listen. Mostly, her dance engaged her audience.

Analogy/Metaphor

If I want to compare myself, I compare myself to the dance. Because dance in my sight and bottom of my heart is something which explains about everything. Movement. Emotion. A story. And music. My half of my life, half of my heart, my body belong to the emotion, dance and music. Dance and music are telling very different stories.

Life-Long Experiences

Although Amadnia, coined this metaphor, “I compare myself to the dance,” during the sixth workshop, its appropriateness was apparent during our conversational interview. Amadnia, a striking Iranian woman with dark brown hair and pained expressive brown eyes, exuded an impassioned concern for the ‘voiceless’. At seventy-one years of age, she was the youngest participant. Fire burned in her.

Amadnia loved to ‘perform.’ She appeared comfortable and relaxed throughout the performative inquiry activities. She was interested and able to be engaged and to engage her audience. She focused quickly and concentrated deeply. The way she used language was very poetic and suggested a rhythmical quality. Amadnia used her body like an instrument: expression through hand gestures, facial eloquence, and movement. She was very comfortable physicalizing her feelings.

Amadnia was a mother, grandmother, sister, volunteer and friend. Her husband left her approximately twenty-five years ago. She has lived alone since her daughter left home, approximately sixteen years ago. She worried a lot about her daughter because she felt that she took on far too much responsibility.

Throughout the conversational interview, Amadnia spoke of a passion and love for learning. She was “thirsty for learning.” She was well-traveled and considered herself to have a broad perspective on life and an understanding of and tolerance for other cultures. During the first workshop, Amadnia talked of being “internationally” educated through her extensive
traveling and living in different countries, rather than being “classically” educated through having gone to university. She had great respect for learning and this became more and more evident over the course of the six workshops.

When we first spoke at the senior’s center, Ahmadnia mentioned that, generally, the Persian culture was more caring about, and involved with their older generation. She believed that the relationship between older and younger generations was more reciprocal. However, during the fourth workshop, Ahmadnia reflected on “today’s life” and referred to it as the “machine’s life.”

This is the machine’s life!...Now everything is by button. Technology is growing and growing. Sensitivity and emotion are gone! Finished! Humanity, family ties, family situations are different. Throughout the world are running man and wife. In Iran people have two and three jobs, expensive life. They don’t have time for their parents. They don’t have time even for their children. And here is only running, running!

She despaired at how, even in Iran, parents had little time for the old or the young.

Numerous times during our conversational interview and throughout the first five workshops, Ahmadnia, mentioned that she did not speak English very well. In the past, she has attended English classes and was attending them throughout the research study timeline. She was a proud, bright woman and wanted to be able to communicate with people of diverse cultures and education and understand them as well as have them understand her.

The highly educated should handle those who are not with respect. Maybe it is difficult for the higher educated, but handle me with pride so I do not feel lesser or ignored or stupid...Include the silent and ignored in conversation...This is humanity, especially when we get older and need more understanding.

Ahmadnia described herself as “foreign.” She has done varied types of volunteer work and has experienced “racism” toward herself by other volunteers. They have excluded her and
left her out. This was very hurtful to her. However, she was able to confront them and tell them that they were excluding her.

I am foreign. I go to different groups. I am involved with different Canadian groups. Many times they ignore me. You know. That is hurting! I am very strong person. And I don’t care a lot. And I tell to their face, “Your behavior is not polite. Is not humanity.” But they don’t care. Yet they continue their way, even if you tell them that is not good way you are doing. They do it because of my English, because of my nationality. Because. Because. Because. Many becauses...

Ahmadnia alluded to having health problems during our conversational interview and during the workshops she talked about living with four long term chronic diseases, two which she has had since the age of fifteen.

And you must push yourself to. I have four chronic diseases, two since fifteen. I push myself. Any physical activity, I am suffering. I am very lonely with these diseases.

Ahmadnia lived with pain and was always tired with her chronic diseases but she pushed herself. One of her greatest concerns and fears was that down the road these chronic diseases would rob her of her independence. She was a fiercely independent individual! Throughout the workshops, she always pushed herself to come to each workshop, be on time and engage in the work. As well, she played table tennis seven hours per week and volunteered with seniors through a peer counseling program. Being very involved with different organizations has been her “survival.” She found herself getting upset if she didn’t push herself to get up and go every day. She showed a great deal of determination throughout the workshops.

Ahmadnia derived a lot of satisfaction volunteering with seniors. She felt compassion and empathy towards them. She ‘hurt’ for the elderly who were treated with disrespect and were ignored or made invisible.

Some people in this society ignore you when you are very old and this happens many times and people get
hurt...I don’t look my age. I’m quick. Some people are older or look older and people behave badly to them. They ignore them or are rude to them. It hurts me for the other person.

Throughout the workshop sessions, Ahmadnia revealed a supportive and caring nature, especially with regard to Violet, who at eighty-nine years of age was the oldest participant in the study.

Violet, you encourage all of us today because you are very brave being the age you are. In here, doing everything. That is wonderful. Congratulations! (all the other participants agree) And when I see you, I am encouraged to do something else. You are a role model to me.

Ahmadnia came across as a very responsible person. When she committed, she committed wholeheartedly. And she expected the same commitment from others. She attended all six workshops and brought to each an eagerness to learn, to engage and to risk.

Ahmadnia was a person with both strong feelings and strong opinions. There were times during the workshops that she jumped to conclusions and judgments without taking the time to reflect and ‘hear’ what was being said. In the fourth workshop, Ahmadnia admitted that she needed to work on being more patient and not jumping to judge too quickly.

The thing is, when Ida talked about listen to the people and then judge the people and then decide and pay attention to their talk, that is very good. I don’t have that patience...Recently I practice and I practice in my mind that this is not good. You are always thinking that if somebody else is jumping on your talking you are not happy. Okay. And I will learn to have patience until people finish speaking and then I can answer. But until now, sometimes immediately, suddenly, I cannot hold myself and keep myself from jumping...

As the workshops evolved it became evident that Ahmadnia had both high expectations of herself and of others, perhaps unreasonably high expectations at times. There were times
when she feared that her work would be judged negatively or not be good enough. Even in the last workshop, after doing improvisational work, she was unsatisfied with her personal work.

I am sorry. But I am not satisfied yet because I didn’t think I did the things come off good.

Ahmadnia’s expectations of other participants’ commitment outside of the workshops (continuing as a group for social time together) in the future caused some tension. When asking for or questioning other participants’ commitment Ahmadnia becomes quite forceful. As well, Ahmadnia mentioned that she has always had high expectations of her daughter, at times “impossible” expectations.

Like ‘the dance’ that she compared herself to, Ahmadnia was expressive. Her passion was heartfelt, at times explosive. Ahmadnia’ curiosity was tangible. She questioned the group a lot. However, during the fourth workshop it became clear that Ahmadnia was also beginning to question herself and her fears. Like ‘the dance,’ she began to open up to the group on a more personal level and show a vulnerable side. By the final workshop, it was evident that Ahmadnia was taking time to listen to the other participants and hear what they were storying. Like ‘the dance’ she was beginning to let go, to let go of pre-judging.

Ida’s Story

‘IAm’ Performance

I am Ida Smith and I was seventy-seven in March. I have come very long way because I was born prematurely in rural Ireland and the didn’t expect me to live at that time...So I’ve come a long way but I’m content with my life.

When I went to nurse I was very unsure of myself; I had no self-confidence. And I did well in my nursing career and that gave me an enormous amount of confidence.
I have volunteered for years in some capacity. I hope – I like to think that I’m a bit wiser. And I give of myself to my family and my relationships. I’m a good administrator. I’m tactful. I’m astute...I think I’m a good person and I’ve learned so much through my life experiences. I’m compassionate. I love life. I love nature. It was one of the things that brought my husband and myself together was our great love of the outdoors.

I love my pets. I’ve always loved dogs...I love to travel. I have a wicked sense of humor which gets me in trouble at times. And I’m looking forward to being a grand-mother for the first time, September 9th or 10th. And I married late and my kids married late so this is very special to me and when my daughter-in-law told me on New Years Day I disgraced myself by bursting into tears and making her cry as well because I get very emotional about these things. The one thing I don’t like about myself is my weight. I’ve battled my weight all my life...And I have very strong family ties both here and in Ireland...

My main fear is like many of us. I fear becoming completely incapacitated, physically or mentally, and thus becoming a burden to my sons. I’m very aware of my own mortality since my husband died. And one of the things I’ve tried to get through to my children is that I could die very suddenly. And they don’t see that at all, and that’s my one great fear. But I do hope to live long enough to see my grandchild grow up for several years because I want to see his father, my younger son, deal with the problems I dealt with, with him in his adolescence.

So I think I am older, wiser and, I hope, a better person because I have benefited immensely from all my life experiences, both joyful and sad.
Ida’s ‘I Am’ performance captured the flavor of the multiple stories that she narrated during the research study. Her wry, sometimes wicked sense of humor peeked out. She storied both her steadfast approach to life under some extremely challenging experiences and her belief that all her experiences have made her better and stronger. Ida performed her stories of vulnerability. She narrated her wisdom. She exhaled her contentment.

**Analogy/Metaphor**

Ida performed her analogy calmly, and with absolute certainty. She knew she was a rock. But, just in case we, the group, misunderstood, Ida also made it clear that just because she was strong didn’t mean that she was hard. Many of her performed stories had shown her sensitivity and kindness to others.

*I compare myself to a rock, because I’ve come to realize that I’m a very strong person and I’m a survivor. But I do have my soft side as well.*

**Life-Long Experiences**

During the conversational interview and throughout the evolving of the workshops, it became clearer and clearer that Ida’s comparison of herself to ‘a rock’ in the course of the sixth session was apt. Ida was a self-described ‘life-long learner’ who never backed down from the many challenges she faced throughout her life. She “loves a challenge.” Ida was a wife (now widowed), a mother, a sister, a friend and a volunteer. She was a soon-to-be grandmother for the first time and absolutely thrilled because she thought she would die never having felt the joy of being a grandmother. Ida was determined to leave her future grandchildren the stories of what she came to believe was her ‘wonderful life.’ She loved her sons deeply and took great pride in the “wonderful” men that they have become. Ida considered herself to be a person who took care of other people.
It was difficult to be alone after my husband died because all my life I've looked after other people. My sons have their own life to lead. Both could be transferred and the thought of that appals me... I would never hold them back... Yes, you can please yourself. But I don’t get a great deal of satisfaction from that. I love people! And I find people so interesting. I like to be with people.

Family, both nuclear and extended, friends and the meaningfulness and insight she gains from volunteering were of utmost importance to Ida. A journal article from the second workshop attested to this.

I did not know what to expect at the start of last week’s session, I enjoyed meeting the other ladies and watching how they expressed themselves in actions and words. I thought that this would be a very staid and sober experience — but there was lots of laughter which was wonderful. There was also a sense of sadness at times as I listened to stories of loneliness and discrimination against older people. It made me think how very fortunate I am to have 2 sons, loving family members in Ireland to whom I am very close and wonderful friends in North Vancouver and other places. I feel thankful too for the fellowship in my church and all the great people I know in the Lynn Valley Seniors Association. I think too with thankfulness that I am still able to be physically active and able to enjoy the companionship of my 2 dogs.

What do I expect from today’s session — I don’t know — but I think it will be interesting!!

It was evident throughout the course of the workshops that Ida was a caring, encouraging and supportive participant. She showed her support through kind words, thoughtful inquiries and stories of her own personal struggles and challenges that normalized what other participants were going through.

It goes with the territory of getting older. I just turned seventy-seven and sometimes I get frustrated because I get tired. It takes me longer, you’re not alone. It takes me longer to do things.
Ida, who grew up in rural Ireland, was seventy-seven years old. She appeared serene, except when faced with an activity that was out of her comfort level. Then, while she mustered the resolve to do the activity, her body language would be somewhat stiff or, at times, agitated until she began the activity. Ida admitted to the portrayal of a ‘calm’ exterior, while, at times, churning inside. Perhaps, at times, Ida’s politeness and good manners held her back from expressing her true feelings. At one point during workshop number four, Ida’s turn had been taken over by Ahmadnia and Ida didn’t say anything. During our meeting to go over the individual findings, I asked Ida why she had not spoken up and she replied that she hadn’t wanted to be “rude.”

Ida was a competent individual who said that, through her work as president of the senior’s association, she has learned the patience and wisdom to listen to all sides and then make a judgment.

And I knew that I had come a long ways because most of you know that I was president of the senior’s association here and one of the treasurers said to me one day after a meeting, “I really like it Ida,” she said, “You listen to everybody before you make a decision.” And I thought, “hallelujah” I’ve come a long way.

In our initial conversation, Ida talked about what she felt had the greatest impact on her life – the death of her father when she was six. She was the oldest of four siblings, and was shy throughout her childhood and youth. She talked of how her mother singled her out for “belittling” and “guilt trips” that continued until she left Ireland when she was in her early thirties. Eventually Ida said that she “had to come to terms with feeling unloved by my mother.” Ida related how painful this was for her and how hurtful, especially when she began to see the loving relationships that other women had with their mothers. She attributed her lack of self-esteem and confidence throughout her childhood and young adulthood to her mother’s belittling
and favoritism of her youngest sibling. In the first workshop Ida mentioned that, "invisibility shatters confidence."

In her mid-twenties, Ida decided to train to become a nurse. Her mother told her she would never finish. Ida said that she developed a resolve and a desire to prove her mother wrong and show that she could succeed. As a result, she won the highest honor for her graduating year – the Gold Medal in Nursing. Ida has developed strength and voice by working through whatever hurdles or hard times life has thrown her way. She believed in and has lived rising above challenges and seeing things through. As well as her father’s early death and her mother’s life-long contempt, Ida has faced many challenges in her life: coming to Canada by herself when she was in her early thirties, being unable to have ‘biological’ children, being driven to the verge of a nervous breakdown by the difficulties in raising one of the sons she considered herself so “fortunate” to have been able to adopt and dealing with the tremendous stress that that placed on her marriage, the death of her husband whom she considered her “soul mate and best friend,” the man whom she said “helped me develop the strength to believe in myself” approximately four years ago, and the looming loss of physical strength and energy.

Ida shared with all of us that loneliness, at times, is something she faced.

Yes, there is a loneliness. Once your spouse dies life is different. It changes. I never complain. I have children, but they are busy. There is no one to talk to at night, to tell them the experiences and to rejoice with them during the happy times. Being a widow is a whole different experience...Sometimes you force yourself to go out in order to have a life...Everyone’s wonderful at the time of loss but then it’s up to you to get out and remake your life. And it’s not easy!

By engaging in meaningful activities such as working to fulfill her husband’s dream of helping to build the senior’s association, through her work as their president and taking the life writing course at Capilano College, Ida has been able to minimize some of her loneliness as well as
begin a journey where she revisited her life and has concluded that, “I have had a wonderful life!” She is content and satisfied with her life because:

I’ve accomplished most of what I’ve wanted to...I didn’t realize until this age, looking back, what a lot I did accomplish.

As well, Ida was involved in supporting her political candidate and attending and participating in recreational commission planning meetings.

Ida was a responsible, conscientious and committed individual. She attended all six workshops and participated in all the activities. She was never boastful but she was aware of her ability in a leadership role. She had a wonderful, “wicked” sense of humor and appreciated “irreverent” behavior in the other participants. While Ida projected a calm, serene, quiet, almost reserved demeanor under most circumstances, when she did embodied performative work or became involved in meaningful discussions, her passion came to the surface. As the workshops progressed and Ida became more relaxed, she gestured more to express her ideas and feelings, her face became more expressive and her vocal range became larger. Ida had a wonderful, expressive vocabulary. When she ‘performed’ for the group, she was completely engaged and focused and always willing to step on the edge and dive out of her comfort level. Over the course of the six workshops, Ida became freer with the physical work and generally more spontaneous.

‘Like a rock’, Ida was a steadfast participant during the course of the workshops. ‘Like a rock,’ Ida began to ‘let go’ over the course of the six workshops and be in the moment, risk in the moment. ‘Like a rock,’ Ida began to embody her work. Letting go, risking appearing foolish or unprepared was not easy for Ida at first. But as the workshops progressed, Ida’s voice became more compelling as she let go, as she expressed herself in ways that were ‘foreign’ to her. ‘Like a rock,’ Ida relaxed into the performative work and heeding her softer side, became aware that
there were many ways of exploring one's self, of exploring one's capacity for voice besides verbally.

Dana's Story

'I Am' Performance

I am Dana with one N... I enjoy my family. I have a daughter who wins every conversation with me by telling me that she loves me... And her daughter does the same thing. I feel very appreciative of my family. Especially my husband. I think I'm very lucky...

And so I think we need the togetherness with people and to be happy with people and realize how hugging is so important and helping people is very important and that's what I'm trying to do... I like to help people.

I like to encourage people to do the best they can do. One of the things I've done at the stroke group is to get people knitting. They say, "Oh I can't knit. I haven't knitted for years." Well, I've got people knitting and they didn't know how to knit anymore...

I wish I wasn't so short tempered. I jump off the handle very quickly. Not with most people. Mostly with people closest to me. (laughs) Which I guess is best to keep it at home, isn't it...

I fear I won't be around to see my great grandchildren...

I would like to see the world a happier place. I think things are rather sad right now. We read 'The Economist' and some of the things you read are really an eye-opener and you wonder how people can be so angry with each other, how they can be so unreasonable...
Dana’s ‘I Am’ performance embraced many of the facets of her spontaneous storytelling. She performed her joy in helping others and loving and being loved by her family. She narrated stories of appreciation for her family and often singled out her husband as her soul mate and best friend. Ida embodied her conviction that people need to be hugged. She inhaled spontaneity with every performative act. She lived ‘doing’ instead of ‘saying.’

**Analogy/Metaphor**

Dana colored the group with humor and animation, anecdotes and demonstrations. Every morning she looked in the mirror and told herself that she was beautiful. She took a deep breath, smiled gently and performed her analogy with arms spread wide.

_I am like an azalea in full bloom._

**Life-Long Experiences**

“Like an azalea in full bloom,” Dana was a spontaneous, warm, lively, affectionate, vivacious woman of seventy-five. She was ‘abloom’ with her lovely white hair, rosy cheeks, sense of humor and personable friendly manner.

Dana had suffered a number of strokes during the past few years and was concerned their effects on her would limit her ability to participate in the study. She mentioned that the strokes had had a negative impact on her self-confidence and she worried that she wouldn’t be able to focus and concentrate as well as she used to. She was also concerned that she would not be able to express herself as eloquently as she used to be able to. Throughout the first five workshops, Dana continued to express doubts about not being ‘good enough’ although she became considerably less apprehensive and much more relaxed ‘performing’ the activities as the study evolved. During the very first activity in workshop number one, Dana said, “I don’t feel I can do any good on this at all.” Dana also looked for approval and acknowledgement that what she had done was all right while, herself, acknowledging how well she thought the other participants had done.
Okay? That’s all you had to do. Oh. I thought I had to do more. (laughs)...That’s very interesting. All those things I agree with very much but I couldn’t come up with them.

Dana undervalued her abilities and this was a thread throughout the first five workshops. During the fourth workshop, after listening to other participants’ “I Am” pieces and just before performing hers, Dana said, “It gets harder and harder to live up to all these things being said.” Later, in the fifth workshop, Dana is reflecting on her belief that she doesn’t say everything well enough and she gets support from the group.

Dana: Well I feel that all the women in this room have expressed themselves very well. And I, I don’t know if I can come up with that. I know that I feel the way they talked. I felt the same while they were saying it. (points to each of the ladies) I felt that, I felt that. You know over the years you do a lot of things and you realize you know a lot of things, probably more than you give yourself credit for. But they all said it very well. (looks at Marianna)

Marianna: And so did you.

Dana: (laughs) Oh I don’t know if I do. I don’t feel I do say everything well enough.

Laara: Don’t put yourself down.

Dana: Oh I know, I’m inclined to.

Marianna: You need to have faith in yourself.

Dana: Yeah. That’s how I feel. (gestures to include all the participants) Each one of you said what I would have said had I been able to express myself.

Laara: You do, very well.

Dana: Uhmm. Thank you.

The irony of Dana’s view of herself as being less competent in expressing herself was that she expressed herself brilliantly physically, through whole-body expression, including facial
expressiveness, hand gestures, body rhythm and vocal variation. Dana storied a lot through physical actions and expression. When she used her body in tandem with verbalization she was unselfconscious. At times she did struggle for the words, but they usually came, and even before they did we understood what it was that she expressed. After the first activity, in the first workshop, Dana was able to feel comfortable enough to relax and engage herself and others in the process. She was able to focus and concentrate the majority of the time. Her humor was infectious. She took pleasure in making all of us laugh. Dana also was able to laugh at herself and this became more evident as the workshops evolved.

Dana was seventeen when her father died and as the eldest of four children she left high school to work to lend financial support to her mother and siblings. Even then, her sense of responsibility was strong. She has always wished that she could have gone on to higher education. When we talked about whether or not the participants felt not as equal to people who were higher educated, Dana responded, “A little bit for me, but I overcame it.” Overcoming, facing challenges and, with the help of her husband, responsibly searching out the best ways that she can have a wonderful quality of life while living with the effects of strokes, was something Dana lived every day. She was a member of the Stroke Club and volunteered by giving other members massages and inspiring them to do their best and not give up.

Dana was a passionate advocate of including people. She felt that it was everyone’s individual responsibility to include others. When, as a group we talked about the onerous effects of ignoring or isolating older people Dana said:

I had an experience years ago. I was ignored by two sister-in-laws at a shower and I made a point never to do that. I draw in people.

Including people and drawing them in seemed to come naturally to Dana. She had a remarkable positive attitude and focused on the good in people rather than the bad. Practicing positive self talk had become a part of Dana’s life. She revealed that, “I look in the mirror every morning and
tell myself how wonderful I look.” In reference to the difficulties in being social, Dana said, “The social part of things is very important when you get older. Sometimes you don’t feel like doing something but you tell yourself to go.” Dana was a friendly woman who described herself as the type of person who stops and talks to everyone who wants to talk.

In our conversational interview, Dana told me that in order for her to have voice she needed to give of herself. When she storied about helping or supporting friends, or people in the Stroke Recovery Group her voice was strong and compelling. She showed great conviction in her belief that she was contributing in a positive way by volunteering. When she supported us or encouraged us or inspired us, her voice was strong and compelling, spontaneous and genuine, and always appreciative. When she commented on a performative piece by Ida and Ahmadnia, she said, “Gee, they made me feel that I could see all that.” And “That’s wonderful.” When she told Violet about an ‘obus’ cushion that might help her to sit with more stability and get up more easily, she followed through by bringing one in for the following workshop and having Violet sit on it. Dana was a ‘doer.’ She was proactive, sensible and practical. She did her homework.

Dana loved to knit, paint, sketch and tell jokes. The strokes have impacted Dana’s recreational life. She and her husband used to do a lot of walking, biking and kayaking together. Now she doesn’t bike and her walking and kayaking are limited. She felt bad for her husband because he wouldn’t do recreational activities without her and she felt that he was missing out on opportunities to spend quality time doing recreational activities with their son. Dana wished that her husband wouldn’t worry about her so much that he was always concerned about leaving her alone.

Dana had a very close, loving relationship with her husband, who was ‘first’ in her life, two children who she considered ‘wonderful’ and four grandchildren she was very proud of. She was genuinely grateful for what she considered to be a “wonderful life.” However, she sometimes longed for some “space” or time to herself.
Dana: (gets up and stamps her feet) I want some freedom!!
(participants laugh)

Marianna: What do you think that means?

Dana: (sits down) All this thing has brought memories from here, there and everywhere to me. Way back, and recent. And when my husband first retired. He’s a very kind person. And he does everything for me. But at the same time, I want some freedom! (gets up and stamps one foot)

Laara: You want some space.

Dana: Give me some space. That’s exactly it!

Dana had a soft, gentle sincere manner. Whenever she disagreed with an idea or wanted to present an alternative opinion, she managed to do so without raising her voice or becoming emotional. Hers was a gentle passion. She was very down-to-earth and comfortable being spontaneous. Dana was empathic and mentioned how she attempted “to walk in the shoes of another.”

Like an azalea in full bloom, Dana was spontaneous physically. She storied enthusiastically through physicality. Physically performing her stories, Dana became even more confident as the workshops progressed. As well, Dana became far less self-conscious about what she perceived was a limitation from having suffered strokes – the inability to verbalize what others were verbalizing. In a safe, performative environment, Dana began to forget that she was self-conscious about finding the ‘right’ words and just let go. In doing so, meaningful words were performed by her. When Dana narrated words with meaning, the ‘full’ in ‘an azalea in full bloom’ was realized.

Laara’s Story

‘I Am’ Performance

I am (hands out and palms up) Laara. And my mother called me A---- M-- -- T----C---- Laara. She wanted to cover all the bases and all the fairies in
Christendom. I am seventy-four years old. And I, I’m a caring, loving person for most of the people I know.

My family is always foremost in my mind. I have two sons and one sister. That’s all that’s left of the family. So I’m very careful. Wouldn’t want to lose any of them. And we’re going to welcome a new life on May 8th. So this will be the tie breaker in that family because there’s four boys and four girls and I will be a grandmother again. I hope they find out what causes it. (laughter from the group)

(Sighs) Ohhh, I know a lot of people but I have a few friends. And I term friends, people I can count on that are always there for me. People that you say ‘hello’ to every day and you’ve got a smile for, that’s a different thing, but people who are your friends are there always.

I like my volunteer work at the animal shelter. It’s not a big job. But it’s a great job for me because I’m a real animal person...I would like to build my self confidence. I don’t have a lot of self-confidence. I play a big game, but I’m not always there with my confidence showing. I, I’m trusting the universe more and more each day that I will always be taken care of and cherished and I would like to stop worrying about tomorrow and just concentrate on today.

I fear being a burden to my family if anything happens. I really do. That’s one of my biggest things. Not to trouble someone else. That’s the only time I’ve ever said to myself I would rather take my own life than to be a burden. It’s not the way to look at things but that’s part of what I am. I would like to pass over in my sleep rather than to linger and be ill, but, but then the universe takes care of us. They never open or close a door that another one doesn’t open.

I am a loving, caring person for myself and others and may I always be needed and loved, now and always.
Many of the stories that Laara performed were glimpsed in her ‘I Am’ performance. To love and to be needed and loved in return were narratives that were threaded throughout her performative inquiry. The importance of family is a story that Laara tells over and over again. Laara performed stories of pride in her ability to be independent. Laara performed stories of her fear of asking for help and/or becoming a ‘bother’ or a burden. She, at times, found spaces in which she could perform self-confidence in a spontaneous and animated manner. Laara narrated humor throughout the workshops.

Analogy/Metaphor

Laara exhaled her analogy/metaphor with passion and conviction. She lived ‘wolf’ during the workshops, performing protection toward her own beliefs and toward anyone that she felt needed her. Like a wolf, Laara performed courage.

I am like a wolf. For me, the pack, the family is every thing. Protection. To teach. To succor.

Life-Long Experiences

‘Like a wolf,’ Laara observed and took in the territory before she acted. ‘Like a wolf,’ she had to feel safe before she could let down her guard and reveal her vulnerability. During the course of the study, Laara disclosed the following:

I would like to build my self-confidence. I don’t Have a lot of self-confidence. I play a big game But I’m not always there with my confidence Showing.

Once connected to the participants, Laara was quick to encourage, support, help and share her baking.

Laara was a memorable woman of seventy-three. She had startling snow white hair and vivid hazel/green eyes. When we met for our conversational interview, she was still feeling the effects from a recent large drop in her blood sugar level. Health was a concern for Laara. She
lived with a chronic lung condition and diabetes. At times, walking could be very difficult for her.

Laara had pressing financial concerns that caused her a great deal of worry, at times, especially with regard to loss of independence (transportation) if she couldn’t afford to keep her car. In the first workshop, Laara journaled that she:

...hoped it (the study) would give me a better handle on how to cope with old age and poverty. Every thought you think creates your future. How do you project prosperity, wealth, comfort, confidence, sometimes they seem beyond my reach.

She was fiercely independent and “fears being a burden” to anyone. She expressed passionate concern for single mothers, people with disabilities and seniors whose voices were silenced by being: unheard, pushed around, ignored, and left powerless by those with, and in, power. In the first workshop Laara talked about how she feels “invisible” or that “no notice is paid to her” when she is ignored.

In the first workshop, Laara revealed that she felt “apprehensive” about discussing personal (“close to you”) things. She was anxious about being “judged.” In her first journal entry Laara expressed uneasiness about the “unknown” and what would be expected of her during the workshop.

Odd day, cold, blustery, somewhat how I am feeling right now. It’s like walking on a new street and you don’t know what to expect...

During the second workshop, Laara mused in her journal that:

I enjoyed our time together and I’m sorry I have to leave early today. Baked banana bread for the tea, hope they enjoy it. I’m not very good about sharing thoughts and ideas.

As the workshops unfolded, Laara’s ‘apprehension’ about discussing her feelings and ‘personal things’ lessened considerably and through the performative inquiry activities and discussion she
showed a considerable facility for “sharing thoughts and ideas.” At the beginning of the first workshop, Laara appeared tense, but still spoke in a thoughtful and reflective manner.

By the end of the first activity in workshop number one, Laara revealed a propensity for eloquence and engaging in the moment. She had a wonderful, rich vocabulary and appeared serious about the work. She showed great humor and the ability to embody both the physical and the mental in her work.

During the course of the six workshops, Laara’s fear of being judged was tested and she found her voice and it was strong.

And I volunteer as well, maybe not with people, but I volunteer as well... We all participate to the best of our abilities, to the best of what we can do. Maybe it’s not enough. But it’s the best that I can do right now. And that’s what counts as well. Every small thing counts for a big thing.

Laara loved cats and volunteered at a cat shelter. She said that, “I think it’s very important for people to have something to love.” She felt a tremendous sense of responsibility towards the cats she cared for. She loved cats because her relationship with them was reciprocal: “They give unconditional love and I give unconditional love.”

Because of a tragic loss in Laara’s life when she was a young mother, she has had an “overwhelming sense of responsibility and guilt” over the years. This heightened sense of responsibility and desire to give resonated throughout the workshops. Laara came to the fifth workshop and participated in all the activities even though she had been bitten and scratched by a frightened cat and had a bandaged arm and hand and was on pain killers.

Laara had the ability to comfort, to encourage, to support or to motivate other participants with few words and/or a simple touch. An image that lived with me was Laara reaching out to connect with Violet at a moment when Violet was feeling despondent and sad. Laara reached out to connect with Violet by holding her hand. This simple connection became such a source of
comfort, not only for Violet, but for the rest of us as we watched. It was visual. It was very powerful. It was as if Laara was transferring some of her strength to Violet. It was incredibly moving!

Laara believed in and practiced the metaphysical. She practiced meditation. Through meditation, she gained “peace,” “harmony” and a belief that “things will turn out.”

Laara loved to bake, cook, paint and “care for” family and friends. She was a mother, grandmother, sister, friend, volunteer and champion of those whose voices she feels have been silenced. Laara had been divorced for many years and talked about the importance her small family played in her life.

Laara was solid, relaxed and focused when she explored the performative inquiry activities. She was apt at including her audience in her performance. She used lots of eye contact and, at times, humor. She storied through reliving experiences and was adept at becoming the characters in her stories through taking on their accents and expressions. While doing the performative inquiry activities, Laara appeared free to admit how she felt and what she wanted. She loved performing to an audience.

‘Like a wolf,’ Laara quickly lived her desire to protect and care for. The group participants and the researcher experienced first hand her generosity with baking, comforting and massages. ‘Like a wolf,’ Laara was careful not to story her experiences of vulnerability until she knew the territory was safe. ‘Like a wolf,’ Laara could go on the defensive when she felt she was being attacked. As the workshop process progressed, Laara began to let go, and experience what was happening for her in the here and now through the performance of her stories. Her voice gained confidence and assurance. During the second workshop, Laara storied her belief that she wasn’t very good at sharing her thoughts and ideas. By workshop four, she was narrating her life experiences and feelings about them with eloquence.
Violet’s Story

‘I Am’ Performance

My name is Violet. I am 89. I like my friends and I love some of them. They are so friendly and they have helped me so greatly. I appreciate the help I get from them.

I am compassionate. I try to help wherever I can.

I wish I could speak up in a group more.

I’d like to do things more quickly.

I worry when I get into bed that there will be an earthquake. I jump at the drop of a pin. I hope that I might have a year or two of life so maybe I can do something for someone.

I’m very lucky to have lived this long without too many worries.

Violet performed her difficulty in speaking up in a group during the beginning workshops. Later, she performed her ability to find voice and express it eloquently to the entire group. Violet narrated stories of sadness and despondency and frustration. Later, she performed experiences of kindness and compassion and vitality. Throughout the workshops Violet performed gratitude. Always, Violet performed innate dignity.

Analogy/Metaphor

Violet performed her analogy with gentle certainty. ‘Like the wind’ Violet was up and down both emotionally and physically during the first two workshops. By the fourth workshop, Violet performed change; ‘like the wind’ she changed. She performed letting go of feeling ‘useless’ and trying on agency.

I am like the wind because like the wind I blow hot and cold.
Life-Long Experiences

Violet explained that she tended to be ‘up and down’ (depressed) and during our car rides she mentioned that she had felt “despondent.” However, she went on to clarify that, “I am not suffering; I am gaining.” Violet is eighty-nine years old.

When I arrived to pick Violet up for our interview, I glimpsed a petite lady sitting in an armchair in the apartment lobby, walker beside her. I was moved by how lovely she looked, beautifully attired, exuding dignity. She seemed so fragile and I was struck by her courage in meeting with me, a stranger, and trusting me to deliver her safely to the senior’s center. There was a feeling of sadness about her. She felt that she didn’t have much too offer. Over the duration of the next two months, I came to learn that trusting is basic to Violet’s character and that her fragile petiteness housed a well of determination, courage and steel that served as model for me and the other participants in the study.

During the first performative inquiry activity, Violet became quite disgusted with herself when she had difficulty coming up with ideas.

I’ve only written one thing down. I’ve hit a blank…
I couldn’t get any further…No, I can’t…I’m awful!
I’m useless!

She was very soft spoken, hunched over as if she was disappointed in herself, and performing only negatives about herself. However, as soon as she was able to work collaboratively and add sound and movement to her image, she became focused, relaxed and engaged in the process. She was able to laugh at herself and others. Violet had wonderful wit and a marvelous sense of humor. Over the period of the six workshops, it became clear that Violet loved to perform for an audience. When we debriefed the activities, Violet said:

It feels good. It makes me think about a lot of things in here…What you can do. What I did do.

At the end of the first workshop, the following exchange took place among the participants:
Violet: It’s nice to laugh. I tell you, we don’t do enough of it.

Laara: (to Violet) Your face has changed so much since we started. Unbelievable.

Violet: (to the group) Gosh, look what you’ve done for me.

Marianna: (to Violet) Look what you’ve done for yourself.

Laara: (to Violet) Look what you’ve done for us.

Ahmadnia: (to Violet) You are a role model.

(all the participants agree)

She’s everybody’s role model.

Violet: How come?

Laara: You give us hope for the future.

Dana: And you’ve got a beautiful smile.

The group had great respect for Violet and as a whole acknowledged her courage and determination in participating in the study and her inspiration in engaging in the activities.

Violet’s first husband left her after thirty-six years of marriage. Violet and her second husband were married for approximately twenty-five years. She told me that it was during that marriage that she knew what it meant to be loved by a husband. Violet had been a widow for approximately four years. She was a mother, a grandmother, a great-grandmother and a loyal friend. She had lived in her apartment complex for approximately two and a half years and she felt “excluded” by most of the long-time residents. When Violet was asked whether or not she was lonely, she replied, “Oh yes. A lot.” She mentioned that some of the long term residents would say ‘hello’ to her:

But that’s as far as it goes and I find that very sad. In a way, they almost make me feel that they don’t want to be bothered with you.
She longed for connection with other people. Through connecting with others and sharing acts of kindness and warmth, Violet derived meaning and a sense of worth. Friends and friendship meant a lot to Violet.

I don’t have anybody in the building that I can dial up and say, come on, let’s go out for a walk together...They’ve been there for years. They know each other. Uhm. Maybe it’s me because I don’t like to go and ask people for a ride here. I don’t like to do that. But I’m getting along alright now. I’m not so...I was very depressed when I first moved in there and that’s just something because you lose your husband and you’re very sad, you know.

Violet felt close to her daughter who lived on Vancouver Island, but seldom saw her son who was an alcoholic and lived in the lower mainland. This was a source of pain and bewilderment to Violet. She seldom saw her grandchildren and great-grandchildren who lived in British Columbia and Ontario. She felt disconnected from them and wondered, “What did I do wrong?” I was struck by Violet’s openness to be vulnerable and her willingness to express her thoughts and feelings.

Violet talked to me about how, in many ways, she feels without voice. She described herself as having always been shy and prone to sitting back and keeping quiet even when she is bursting to speak up. Violet talked about feeling “stupid” and “dumb” and was worried about not being “smart enough” or “clever enough” to participate in the study. Throughout the six workshops it became evident that Violet had a rich vocabulary, an expressive voice and a wonderful imagination. Violet felt that the lack of a postsecondary education had caused her to lack confidence and she stated, “I feel inadequate.” This feeling of inadequacy was repeated throughout the first two workshops. It was very difficult, almost agonizing for Violet to express her positive qualities, the things she liked about herself. Violet questioned whether or not she had anything “worth contributing” to the study. This concern became such a source of irony
because Violet quickly became a source of inspiration and hope for myself and all the other participants.

After the conversational interview we talked about losses. Violet’s husband’s death sent her into depression and despondency which she mentioned in the later workshops was finally lessening. Approximately one year ago, Violet broke her hip and wrist and she was reconciled to the fact that, physically, she has improved as much as she is likely to.

Violet mentioned that she needed to put more effort into “joining” with others socially. She wondered if “Maybe I’m oversensitive.” She was aware that she wanted to begin to work on becoming more socially involved because she was a social person.

Violet told me that she wanted to have a voice and not be “afraid” to say what she needed to say. During one of the workshops, Violet revealed that she had been “fearful” all of her life.

During the fifth workshop Julia said:

You don’t know me. I’ve been terrible all my life. And been scared of everything. I jump at my own shadow. But no, I’ve never done this (performative inquiry) in my life, before. But I like to do it.

As we left the senior’s center after our first conversation, Violet told me that she hoped that she would live long enough to develop her voice. Interestingly, during our one-on-one conversation, Violet’s voice was strong, genuine, poignant and compelling.

Violet insisted on walking home after our interview. She said that it was time that she began to walk further distances. I was torn. I feared the walk would exhaust her. However, I respected her independence and indomitable spirit. I felt that this was one way to encourage and support her on her journey to voice.

During the first two workshops, Violet was ‘like the wind.’ She most dramatically blew ‘hot and cold.’ By the end of workshop one, Violet was laughing like a girl, freely. Throughout
workshop two, Violet was sad, unfocused and frustrated with herself. However, by workshop four the group was beginning to notice a wonderful change in Violet. She was becoming animated and able to engage with the performative aspect of the workshop. This change became more and more apparent throughout the final two workshops. ‘Like the wind,’ Violet let go and freed herself to perform her stories with a touch of abandonment and a lot of confidence. ‘Like the wind,’ Violet had found a sense of purpose through the research process.

Group Process of Ethnoperformance
(collaboration, safety, performative inquiry and debriefing/discussion)

The workshops unfold. They have a life of their own. Is this due to their collaborative nature? They have a rhythm of their own – a natural poetry. There is a peacefulness about them and yet there is a core of vitality that is inherent in them.

Friday, April 30, 2004 (Marianna’s journal)

The narration of stories and underlying themes evolved through the group process of ethnoperformance which was created through four major avenues all impacting on one another: collaborative work, a safe environment, performative inquiry and debriefing/discussion. All four major avenues could not be separated from one another. They were the threads that when woven together made the fabric. It was through this group process that the five participants were able to empower themselves and create voice through the re-creation and performance of their stories. The group research process was multivocal in nature. The group process of ethnoperformance breathed the stories that the participants all lived as women over seventy years of age.

Collaboration

The research study was collaborative in nature. Participants and researcher worked together during the workshops in a cooperative and supportive manner. The participants took responsibility for the work that was undertaken throughout the workshops including the choices they made. Collaboration allowed for a strong sense of being part of the study, being committed
to the study and being invested in the study. Collaboration allowed for the creation and expression of the participants’ voices. It allowed the participants to create, recreate, tell, and show their experiences, their life stories. Collaboration helped ensure that each participant was given the opportunity for equal space to illuminate their narratives. Collaboration helped ensure that the sharing of feelings and thoughts prevailed. Collaboration insisted that every participant’s voice was heard and valued.

From the start of workshop one, there was a sense that this was a group of participants who were willing to work with one another and risk being vulnerable. Everyone wanted to be helpful. While one participant was speaking or performing, the other participants were attentive and respectful.

Safe Environment

Creating, building and maintaining a safe environment for the participants was instrumental to the integrity of the study. Only within a safe environment was it possible for participants and researcher to open up, to feel free and strong enough to be spontaneous, to show vulnerability, to risk revealing their fears, hopes, dreams and disappointments. Only within a safe environment was it possible for the participants to risk trying something different, something out of their comfort zone. Only within a safe environment was the possibility of self-honesty able to be realized.

In order to create and maintain a safe environment, participants and researcher agreed upon seven group rules: confidentiality, flexibility, mutual respect, respectful listening, a non-judging attitude, no right or wrong way of doing the activities and a collaborative sharing. With regard to flexibility, it was important that the participants felt no pressure to come to every workshop. They were not obliged to attend if they were tired, ill, or had had a previous appointment. As well it was agreed that the participants were not to push themselves beyond
their physical ability. They could take time off and rest at any stage of the workshop. We all agreed to take a tea break halfway through each workshop.

Being involved in creating group rules and expectations helped the participants realize that as individuals they held power within the group, they had a strong voice, an equal voice in the group. Overall, the collaborative creation of group expectations was the beginning of a process that built a safe shelter in which the participants felt valued enough to be spontaneous with their ideas and feelings, courageous enough to risk sharing not only what was pleasant in their lives, but also what they feared, what was painful to them, what hurt, what was shameful for them, what was meaningful to them and finally, supported enough to challenge and be challenged. During workshop number five, I pointed out to the group that I noticed there seemed to be freedom to their work. They replied in the following way.

Marianna (to participants): One of the things that seems to be coming up over and over again is that as you get up and you actually improvise, as you actually do the performance, there seems to be a freedom. There seems to be a spontaneity that comes from it, uhm, and a sense of fun. Am I wrong or are you feeling the same thing?

Laara: It’s because we’re safe.

Marianna (to Laara): Because you feel safe.

Laara: (nods yes)

Marianna: Does everybody feel safe?

Participants: (nod yes)

Ida: Yes. And I’m not even aware of the camera.

Laara: Me neither.

Dana: I’m not either.

Ida: In the beginning I was a bit self-conscious...I’m no longer (laughs). And I’ve gotten to know you all, so there’s nothing to be fearful of, or embarrassing because we’re all just speaking our thoughts.

Ahmadnia: The thing is, I think that everybody here is comfortable and
everybody thinks about other people as friendly and a little caring and I also saw you (refers to Marianna) are a very friendly person and you are gathering this small group together to be fresh and friendly. And I saw all of these participants who are here, they are very responsible...That is something. With any group you be comfortable, you be easy, then you can do everything... You are doing your best as you can.

Marianna: Do you think then with safety, with feeling comfortable, I guess that there's a sense of belonging, I don't know, it seems that when I look at the tapes, people feel they belong as a group.

Participants: (nod in agreement)

Ida: It's because we come from different experiences but we all have the same concerns about family and love and having place in the community and I think that comes through...

Ahmadnia: ...we are close together. Almost all our ages are close to each other...the thing is, in this group we feel very close...we feel very comfortable.

Dana: It's as if, if I met any one of you in the shopping mall or anywhere, I'd put my arms around you and give you a little hug. Cause I've got to know you and I always feel that way with people I like.

Ida: Well, I always enjoy this because it's a change from the rest of the pace of the week. And I'm getting ready to go away and I always find that stressful cause there's always so much to do, so I really welcome this, this time with all of you.

Performative Inquiry

The 'I Am' performative inquiry pieces were heartfelt. I am no longer surprised at the level of commitment to the performative inquiry this group of five women gives of themselves...What surprised me was the impromptu additions (spontaneous) the women added when they read their written versions. Is it possible that the performative act allows freedom to express eloquently that which is in one's heart? Does embodied work compel free one to delve deeper or answer more sincerely? Does performed ethnography through performative inquiry create space for voice?

Friday, April 23, 2004 (Marianna's journal)

Learning through performative inquiry (collaborative exploration of participant reflections using activities such as performative writing, performative drawing, and drama
activities such as visualization, sculpting, tableaux scenes, improvisation and role play) made possible spaces of awareness and insight within which the participants’ stories and themes were illuminated and elucidated upon. The performative inquiry work spoke to what the participants themselves were thinking, feeling and doing. This kind of work invited the women to express what was meaningful to them in a spontaneous fashion. The performative inquiry activities invited the participants to become curious and to question. Performative inquiry encouraged risk taking and opened up the possibility for the participants to move into the ‘borderlands’ that Denzin talked about, walk along the ‘edge of chaos’ that Fels mentioned and to explore the liminal spaces that Garoian described. This ethnoperformative work included activities of drama, vocal work, and writing both individually and as a group. It was here that the participants created voice through immediacy and the support of each other. Through performative inquiry, spaces were created that encouraged the participants to ‘do, know, talk and create.’ Performative inquiry work engaged the participants. They worked hard. They showed a lot of eagerness and they had a lot of fun.

Performative inquiry was embodied work (mind and body working together as one). Those participants who embraced it found a freedom to be both immediate and spontaneous. They took great pride in the activities that they participated in and developed more confidence in their selves as the workshops progressed. The vocal quality, clarity, strength, range and rhythm of all five participants improved over the course of the six workshops. The use of the body and facial expressions increased as well. Freedom to express being tired, lonely, angry, hurt, sad, useless, confused, frightened, indecisive, or plain old ‘upside down’ in the case of Ahmadnia became the building blocks for creating voice. The performative inquiry activities created spaces to inspire and be inspired, as well as spaces for awareness and interstanding.

Performative inquiry was flexible and this was so important to the participants who, at the stage of life they were in, needed an open, adaptable environment. Within this environment,
the participants, all vital, intelligent, thoughtful, creative and interesting women with so much experience to share, found their natural ease to be playful. There was no doubt that as the workshops progressed, all the participants experienced what Fels, 1998, p. 3 called ‘freefall’ or letting go. Along with trusting and embodied play, ‘freefall’ evolved naturally. As well, the participants were constantly living and performing a sense of accomplishment.

During workshop 3, when only Ida and Ahmadnia were able to attend, the participants worked collaboratively with the researcher to create an ethnoperformative piece. A painting was the inspiration for the following piece that was eventually created and performed. Working together was magical. The energy that was produced was electric. The participants were intrigued throughout the process and remained engaged, enthusiastic and focused from beginning to end. A lot of laughter was generated. What follows is the piece that was eventually created by interweaving out different experiences of the painting.

A peaceful, mysterious and moody scene.

Landscape near the mountains.

Rain, with possibly a thunder storm threatening in the valley.

Drama.

The trees are almost green and yellow.

It is close to autumn season.

Verdant, rolling countryside.

I like to go there for swimming in the river and sleep on the grass, and enjoy the sunshine, the sound of running water and leaves rustling in the wind.

I wish the sun always rises.
In the discussion of the performance, Ahmadnia, whose expectations of her self and others tended, at times, to be unreasonably high was concerned that they had not practiced the piece.

Ahmadnia: To play a scene we should practice. We are amateurs. We need to practice. We are not professionals. Especially for me, whose English is a second language.

Ida replied that practicing and being perfect was not the point of performative inquiry, that performing the piece was about “being spontaneous and improvising.” Then Ahmadnia revealed that she had felt “freedom” in performing the piece, partially because she wasn’t performing for or to an outside audience and could relax and have fun.

The performative inquiry process imbues participants with voice. There is a freedom to be yourself, to perform as you wish, and to naturally use body and mind together. Ida succinctly summed this up when she explained to Ahmadnia that the work “…is spontaneous. It is about you!” Throughout the workshop process, the participants’ strength, confidence and assuredness continued to build as they performed their work, their experiences of living. Their energy level rose dramatically. Their enthusiasm was tangible. Their voices, both literally and metaphorically, compelled all of us to listen. During the sixth workshop, Violet was invited to sing the way she was feeling during check-in.

Dana: (to Violet) Do you want to go first, Violet?

Violet: Oh lordy. I can’t sing. I croak. (touches her throat with her fingers)


Dana: Just croak. Just hoot.

Violet: (sings) Well, I’m sorry this is our last, well, last meeting anyway. I have been very happy in this group (spreads her arms up and outwards) and I, ah, when I first came I, ah – (rolls her eyes, gestures with her hands) (participants clap)

Marianna: Keep going! Keep it up!
Violet: (laughs and continues singing) I didn’t know what I was going to be doing. So I, uhm, I found out a lot of things I didn’t know and I, ah, I am very happy to have met you all… and it’s been a pleasure. I have looked forward to Friday afternoons because I like it here with everyone and what I hope – it’s improved me a hundred percent, I hope, in some ways (laughs, gestures, shrugs).

Violet, at eighty-nine years of age, was the frailest of the participants and had the least mobility. Over the course of the first two workshops, Violet valiantly performed her struggle with loneliness and a tendency to despondency. She certainly appeared to have climbed into a shell and had a very quiet voice and appeared to hunch her head, shoulders and arms down and inward, as if protecting herself. As well, in frustration, she referred to herself as ‘stupid and useless.’ By workshop five, she was looking us all directly in our eyes, speaking up loud and clear, straightening her posture and using her arms, hands and facial expressions to emphasize what she was saying. She was thoroughly enjoying having reclaimed her voice. Here is an excerpt from workshop five, just after Violet asserts that she has practiced her photo piece enough.

Ida: (to Violet) You’re becoming very assertive. It’s wonderful.

Laara: (to Violet) Do you find this rubbing off on you at the manor as well?

Ahmadnia: (referring to Violet) She is very good.

Laara: Are you being more assertive in the manor as well? Because you’ve been coming here?

Violet: Yeah. Well I feel a little more not so silly. You don’t know me. I’ve been terrible all my life. And been scared of everything. I jump at my own shadow. But no, I’ve never done this in my life, before. But I like to do it.

During workshop five, the participants reflected on two photographs in one frame, a young woman and an older woman. Working with a partner they wove together their reflections into one performative work. As they collaborated, they appeared motivated, energetic, focused, intent, and enthusiastic. They were animated and spontaneous. A natural vitality became apparent when the participants created together. This was characteristic of all the work that the
participants performed throughout the six workshops. The piece co-created and performed by Dana and Laara consisted of an improvised mime performance by Dana of how the photos affected her. Then Laara performed the same piece verbally.

Laara: Looking bright-eyed into the future. Wondering what tomorrow brings. Pleasure, optimism, with the ability to take care of your dreams. Questioning the road ahead and her ability to cope with every day matters. What is the purpose of my life? [And this is the second half] The ability to hear the other person. She has found her niche in the world and enjoys the space she has created. Music is always a part of her life and acceptance of her lot gives her peace and contentment.

During the discussion about the photo inquiry, Laara questioned the ethical right to speak for others or impose our will on others. This was completely spontaneous and showed her growing confidence to voice her concern about the choice and consequences of an activity.

Laara: I find taking a picture and speaking of just what you’re looking at doesn’t always create what you want to say.

Marianna: Okay, can you explain that further?

Laara: Well these people (the woman in the photographs) have their own dreams and I’m imposing my dreams on theirs.


Laara: Yes.

Marianna: I’m wondering if, in general, hopes, wishes and dreams aren’t very much alike.

Laara: Could be. Could be.

Marianna: I don’t know. It’s just a thought that I had.

Laara: Yeah. Okay.

Laara felt very strongly about impinging on other people’s privacy or lives or lifestyles. This discussion became a space in which we could both put forth our concerns or our reflections or our curiosity out in the open and acknowledge them.
Ida and Ahmadnia’s performed rendition of their reflections on the two photos certainly became stories of their own lives. Both women performed their own lives. It became obvious that as the participants reflected on their life experiences, wove those reflections into stories and performed their stories, they became empowered. For the participants in my study it was clear that freedom to express themselves was a huge part of coming to voice. Ahmadnia, as did the other participants at various times throughout the workshops, felt safe enough to spontaneously interrupt her performance and begin again with improvised pieces of performance.

Ahmadnia: (gets up and goes to the center of the room and sits with her knees up and her hands on her knees) Hello. Is that my life? It’s beautiful. (Ahmadnia interrupts her performance) (to her audience) Sorry, I add something to this. By myself. I see my life like this: landscape be beautiful. It’s beautiful and I look at the landscape – mountains, trees, and ocean. All are gorgeous. Was my life gorgeous and did I enjoy my life? I think so. Not a bad life. I had a good life. I was healthy. Oh, I was also rich and I had a nice family. My parents cared about me and I got everything I wished. What do I want from my life? 

My life is beautiful and I should think about that positive and I hope my future be as my past and continuously going on. I am looking forward and I think life is beautiful like that landscape and I think tomorrow is late, I should go after my life today and each moment and every moment.

Ida: Hello, I am old. I am approaching the end of my life...I look back now at this great age through my life and realize how short it is. When I married, life seemed to stretch to an infinity of time. There was no ending to it. And then suddenly my children were in school and that’s when you almost lose them because they begin to wait for others. And then they went into high school and that was a difficult time. And suddenly then they were both young men and they were out on their own. And what a wonderful sense of achievement that was, in spite of all the struggle we had given the world two young productive men who were really a credit to us although I don’t know why because it didn’t seem like it would be that way at times. And then eventually my husband retired and that was a special time of life because we could spend time together. Then, I lost him unexpectedly and that was very difficult, but one picks up the pieces and one goes on. And so I look back on my life. It has been an interesting life. It has been, in many ways a wonderful life. And I look back with great contentment on it. What the physical changes show me in the picture are

The changes of age: the grey hair, the sagging jaw, the weight gain that goes with it. But by and large I think the contentment is what that shows.

Ida, like the other participants throughout the six workshops, told a story of the challenge of loss, in this case the death of her husband, and the challenge of having to rebuild one’s
Violet reflected more literally on the photos. It was during the process of this activity and the debriefing and discussion of it, that Violet literally broke free of any restraints that were holding her back from voicing what she was feeling and thinking. She was dynamic! Throughout this activity, Violet was absorbed in the process. She asked all kinds of questions. Her curiousness was boundless. She was animated. Violet stood to say the title of her piece and then she sat in a chair in the center of the room.

Violet: ‘They are Really Absorbed’
To begin with there are different spaces or rooms. Something quite different with the backgrounds. They are both sitting the same way, absorbed in what is being said, because they are very serious and interested in knowing what they are listening to. There must be something of interest to both of them because they are different ages. I wonder what it is all about and why they are both sitting with their legs up and holding their hands around their knees. It doesn’t look very comfortable but maybe I’m looking at it the wrong way. As I said, it could be a young one and older picture of the same person. But then I don’t think so. But they both look kind of melancholic. And they’re very interested in what they are listening to.

During workshop six, researcher and participants collaboratively created and improvised a guided fairy tale that had as its theme what it meant to be old. Basically the fairy tale was performed as it was improvised. The participants spent a lot of time involved in movement. What follows is an excerpt from the beginning that shows the group co-creating the town, the town that is growing old.

Marianna: The first thing we need to know is what’s the name of our town?
Ahmadnia: This Town.
Marianna: This Town? That’s the name? This Town.
Ahmadnia: Yeah. (laughs)
Dana: (to Ahmadnia) What’d you call it?
Marianna: This Town.
Ida: Edenville.
Marianna: Edenville? Edenville?

Dana: Yeah. That’s reasonable.

Marianna: It sounds a bit like paradise.

Ahmadnia: Edenville?


Ahmadnia: Yeah. Okay.

Marianna: So it’s Edenville. Okay. And what’s the town like? Dana what’s the town like? What’s one thing about it?

Dana: Well, it’s got lots of green garden around it, birds and trees.

Marianna: So it has the potential to be very beautiful.

Dana: (nods) Uh huh. A very relaxing atmosphere.

Marianna: A relaxing atmosphere. Okay. Violet, what’s another thing about the town? What else?

Violet: Ah_ah_. It’s getting old. It needs it needs it needs people who see potential in this town to do something about it. Start thinking about rebuilding because it’s in a nice area. A lovely area. And it’s a shame it’s going downhill.

Marianna: Okay. Good. So it’s a town that needs some hope and some action on the part of the townspeople to make it blossom again.

Violet: (nods) That’s better. I wish I had said that.

Marianna: Well no, no. That’s really what you said. I just summed it up. Okay. Ida, what else about this town?

Ida: It’s the town that time forgot. It’s a very old town and it does need modernization.

Marianna: Okay. Good. (to Ahmadnia) Yes?

Ahmadnia: This town is old and has character. I don’t like any change for this town.

Marianna: Ohhh.

Ahmadnia: I like this town stay the same as it is with its character and many, many people come to this town to see around and admire the old of the character.
During the guided fairytale exploration the participants were asked to reflect upon the pros and cons of being over seventy and to reveal to each other what was wonderful about being older and what was problematic. In doing this activity, the participants storied experiences that they had in common as older women.

Ida: You acquire wisdom when you become older, but you also sometimes acquire physical disabilities and lack of energy... When you are young, you look after other people. When you are old, you look after yourself. You have more time for yourself. It's not much fun having more time for yourself. One gets along better with people because one has had more experience at doing that. But one also gets very tired.

Violet: It's okay to be over seventy. I didn’t think it was at one time. But the older you get, you forget what’s over the river or what’s behind the river as long as you, as long as you just be happy in yourself. Not worried about anything. Just let it go...

Dana: I am very comfortable in myself. I enjoy my leisure. The not so good is the aches and pains and the crotchiness of the old body. There’s always something happening (stomping and limping forward). And you go to move a leg and it doesn’t want to move. You go to move the other leg, it doesn’t want to move. (demonstrates)

Debriefing/Discussion

Debriefing and discussion were pivotal ways in which the participants were able to create and recreate their experiences, their stories. Contained within these narratives, were themes that resonated for all of the participants. As well, debriefing and discussion allowed for the normalizing of the participants’ experiences, for the awareness of what each of the five participants had experienced in common, rather than how their experiences differed. Indeed, all five participants shared six powerfully meaningful stories in common.

Throughout the workshops, there was a hunger for debriefing and discussion, not on a quick, superficial level, but on a deeper, richer level wherein researcher and participants risked being patient, became comfortable with pauses and time taken for reflection and, ultimately, with expressing oneself. Debriefing and discussion took place throughout the evolution of each
workshop, especially at the beginning and at the end. Debriefing and discussion were never rushed. It was in the space of debriefing and discussion that misunderstandings were brought into the open, acknowledged and reflected upon by all the participants. This patient space embraced the growth of awareness and insight. This was not always a comfortable space; sometimes participants who were feeling vulnerable found the courage to risk living their pain, hurt, anger, and frustration. Sometimes it hurt to be a part of this space. Often this space was electric with laughter, exciting with questioning and comforting with caring. Debriefing and discussion promoted immediacy. Immediacy nurtured interstanding.

At the beginning of workshop one, the participants were asked how they felt at that very moment. They all admitted to feeling unsure about what would happen and the not knowing caused them, to varying degrees, a certain amount of anxiety. At check out time during the end discussion, the participants were again asked how they were feeling. Their responses follow.

Laara: I feel better than when I walked in because now I know what I’m looking at. It’s the unexplained that you are always a little apprehensive about until you know.

Dana: I’m feeling comfortable. I feel that I’ve learned something. (to Ahmadnia) Didn’t you?

Ahmadnia: This is a nice, friendly group. I feel happy.

Ida: I wasn’t sure what to expect and it’s been very interesting and enjoyable. To be able to laugh together is wonderful!

Violet: I agree with you. I feel great. Better than I have for a long time.

Ida: (to Violet) It’s also just being with people. That’s the fun, those of us who live alone.

Violet: You don’t see this down in our craft room. Nobody talks.

Laara: Nobody talks? That would drive me crazy. I would drive them crazy.

Dana: I think I would drive people crazy; I talk too much.
Ida goes on to reflect upon what has brought this group of participants to be at ease with one another so quickly.

Ida: It’s the sharing of experiences. Whether we are confident or not confident. We have experiences that are the same.

By workshop two, the check in sharing was richer and thicker and revealed a lot of reflection during the past week as is confirmed by the interchange between Ida and Ahmadnia when they discussed the previous week’s workshop. Already these participants are beginning to empathize with one another and to risk trying each others shoes on.

Ida: I enjoyed sharing even though it was difficult to listen to what some of the people were going through. It was an interesting session. Some was hard to hear. It hurts!

Ahmadnia: Helpful experience. I am thinking about the fun...It is important for you and the group to have fun...Always it is interesting to engage and tell a story. Everybody, everything has a story – different stories from people’s life experiences. From ours and others’ life experiences we learn. We figure out things from each others experiences. This is helpful.

Ida: Last week’s laughter and even sad things brought us together.

Ahmadnia: Sadness is part of life. We learn from sad things.

In workshop four, Ahmadnia who, at times, struggled with being patient and really listening to what people were storying and how they were storying, spoke insightfully about her struggle.

Ahmadnia: The thing is, when Ida talk about listen to the people and then judge the people and then decide and pay attention to their talk, that is very good. I don’t have that patience...Recently I practice and I practice in my mind that this is not good. You (Ahmadnia) are always thinking that if somebody else is jumping on your talking you are not happy. Okay. And I will learn to have patience until people finish speaking and then I can answer. But until now, sometimes immediately, suddenly, I cannot hold myself and keep myself from jumping...

The possibility for older women to empower themselves in the arena of debriefing and discussion was rich because more was revealed about what the participants were thinking and how they were feeling. It was like a domino effect. Once one participant revealed things about herself, another participant allowed herself the freedom to open up and reveal more about
herself, and so forth. During this time, it was imperative that the researcher show patience. Time taken here created safety, allowed the participants to explore, reflect and reveal, and supported the participants in taking risks.

After the guided fairy tale in workshop six, a discussion ensued among the participants that spoke to the diversity of the participants, the value of working together, the courage it took to risk and how good it felt when one stepped onto the edge of chaos and explored its space.

Ida: We could go on together in this group for another six months, because we express ourselves in so many different ways. And we’re all coming from different backgrounds, different experiences, (gesturing) so we’ll all express ourselves differently.

Dana: And I have enjoyed so much what other people have said and I thought, ‘Why didn’t I think of that?’ And if I got a chance to say it again, I probably would have (gesturing). I have got something out of everything each one of you said. I have.

Violet: I have too.

Dana: You have?

Violet: (nods, yes)

Marianna: Violet, how was it for you? Were you nervous at first? (referring to the fairy tale)

Violet: Not nervous, but I was bewildered and didn’t know what I was going to be saying.

Ahmadnia: Uncomfortable.

Marianna: And is it hard for you when you’re not sure? Or difficult?

Violet: Yes.

Marianna: And once you’ve done it, how do you feel then?

Violet: Oh, I feel better about it. I don’t know how well I’ve done.

Marianna: No right or wrong.

Violet: I feel better about it. **Being able to say something.** Sometimes my mind goes blank. And I don’t like that.
Violet was so good about putting things in perspective. She was able to put important life concepts in very simple terms. Empowering herself to voice made her feel better. In the end, what was important was what the research study was all about, ‘being able to empower oneself in a meaningful way.

How Voice was Created Through Ethnoperformance

Every woman brings her ‘way of being’ to the workshop. During an awkward or tense or painful moment, always, one or more of the women bring release through awareness, insight, through a memory, a funny interlude, an apt story or a perceptive remark. These are women of maturity, women of experience, women of wisdom. Their gentle ways are inspiring!!!

Work shops that perform embodiment, talking, doing, thinking, and creating allow space for positive ways of being; they almost demand reflection. They allow space for belonging and confidence building. They encourage participants to step into that ‘liminal’ space without threat, without fear.

Friday, April 30, 2004 (Marianna’s journal)

The group process of ethnoperformance which included collaborative work, creation of a safe environment, performative inquiry and debriefing/discussion, made possible spaces within which every participant exhibited a strong sense of pride and a willingness to engage in all aspects of the research study. Everybody had a personal interest in their individual and group work and from the very first workshop they were eager to share their narratives. The ease with which they came to perform their stories became analogous to the ease with which they created voice. Patience and flexibility were synonymous with the group process and were the key ingredients for encouraging the women to create their unique voices. The group process evolved; it was never rushed. The participants were always given time to remember, to reflect, to express and to share. As the workshops progressed, the participants became more animated
and more spontaneous. Their powers of focus and concentration improved. They showed genuine acceptance for each other’s work and learned to be more respectful toward each other’s stories. Over the course of the six workshops, a growing understanding and acceptance of each other’s uniqueness and diversity was storied over and over again.

The group process of ethnoperformance ensured all the participants a strong voice. Specifically, voice was created and maintained through numerous factors that, individually, had the potential for confidence building, but when combined were a dynamic force for empowerment. When the ‘performer,’ (the participant) had an audience, a willing group of listeners, the possibility for voice was enhanced.

Being invited, encouraged and supported to express themselves both verbally and physically in an environment where everyone quickly came to realize that they were in the same boat, was a powerful place for the participants to practice the many different facets of their own voices. The participants empowered themselves when they narrated their personal life experiences, listened to the experiences of others and realized they were not alone because what they had experienced and felt, others had experienced and felt.

Voice burst from the participants when they created for themselves spaces of possibility within which they storied their expression of feelings, ideas and opinions, spaces of possibility within which they felt free to explore meaningful life experiences and question both themselves and others. Humor and laughter were the fertilizer for voice.

The participants nurtured their voices when they learned to begin to accept themselves, with all their flaws as well as their exceptional qualities. By not worrying about being perfect or about being right or wrong, the participants experienced a sense of freedom to be themselves and to let go (freefall). Laara, Dana, Violet, Ida and Ahmadnia experienced the power that pushing through their apprehensions produced. Immediacy, storying personal experiences that are important to them in the here and now, equaled voice. Creating hope created voice.
The ethnoperformance process had a built in domino effect as was observed during the research study. As each participant began sharing experiences and stories, others were compelled to come to voice, to express their own lives. In the nurturing environment of the performative process wherein participants performed topics, themes and issues that mattered to them, that were meaningful to them, the group became a sounding board for creating voice, not only for the quiet, shy, vulnerable and fragile, but also for the angry, hurt, frightened and tuned out.

Six Group Stories

Throughout the research study process the participants performed many different stories, included among these stories were six that the participants all experienced as women over the age of seventy. These six stories were their most compelling stories and were told with conviction and passion. The stories that the participants lived in common were: stories of loss of physical health, stories of love of learning, stories of caring for and being cared for, stories of fear of becoming a burden, stories of being challenged, and stories of loneliness, exclusion and/or invisibility.

Stories of Loss of Physical Health, Strength and Energy

All the participants speak to their frustrations with tiring more easily and the loss of physical strength and energy. I am very conscious of the ‘will’ each participant possesses just to carry on day to day living. Without exception, they are proud women. A sense of pride is very dear to my heart. I value it. I respect it.

Friday, April 2, 2004 (Marianna’s journal)

All five participants narrated their personal stories of loss of physical health throughout the entire research process. There was a collective sense of relief among the participants when they realized that they performed similar narratives of loss of energy and strength. They felt that
they were not alone coping with health problems and that the other members of the group were experiencing many of the same frustrations and fears as they faced the consequences of diminished physical strength and energy. The participants discussed how many older people struggle with the idea of aging and all the losses that follow in its wake. Ida reminded us that, “People find it hard to accept growing old.” Ida shared with the group how she had participated in a long term planning meeting for recreational activities. Although there was a community-wide concern for the looming bulging numbers of the aging population in the very near future, only Ida wanted to talk about aging and recreation. No one else wanted to touch on this topic.

During a discussion at the end of workshop one, the participants shared narratives about how the loss of physical abilities, strength and energy had negatively impacted on their lives. Ida summed up how this loss had and would continue to create change in her life.

Ida: Yeah, it’s tough because I have less physical energy. A loss of hearing has caused me to make an adjustment with the use of hearing aids. But it is the loss of physical strength that is the most frustrating. This year I will have to give up the garden. I cannot walk as far as I used to and when I am tired it takes longer to re-energize.

Ahmadnia: That’s so true, so right.

During a discussion in workshop three, Ida and Ahmadnia talked about the loss of physical strength and energy and how pervasive it was among older people they knew. There was a poignant sense of longing, at times it seemed like grieving, as the participants performed their stories of loss of physical strength and energy.

Ida: I miss the lack of physical strength and energy.

Ahmadnia: Me as well. I don’t have the same physical energy.

Ida: Among my friends it’s a common complaint, the lack of physical energy.

During a discussion in workshop two a moving interchange took place among the participants when Violet, who had had a frustrating week, performed her despair. The group rallied around Violet and shared their personal stories of physical weakness and frustration.
Violet: I get into moods... because it takes so long to get up and get dressed and get breakfast and I don’t know where the morning went.

Ahmadnia: It causes you stress.

Violet: (Violet is having trouble with her hearing aid and everyone pitches in to repeat the word, ‘stress’ and support her to hear. Julia is hunched over and her body is languaging despair and worry. She is constantly pressing the talking stone and moving the hand holding the stone up and down as if weighing it.) I can’t just do it. I can’t get to it. I’m short and I knock things. I break things...

Ahmadnia: We are old. Some a little more older... All of us are old. (All the participants nod in agreement.)

Violet: I’m nearly ninety on my next birthday.


Stories of Love of Learning

Having gone over my notes and musings re: the interviews with potential participants last week, I am struck by how every woman I talked with either verbally, through body language, or a mixture of both, conveyed a desire, respect, and need for learning. Each woman expressed enthusiasm and curiosity about and for engagement in life. To lesser or greater degrees, according to age and health concerns, each woman conveyed motivation to learn, to gather more self-awareness and insight, and to transform themselves if possible.

Tuesday, March 16, 2004 (Marianna’s journal)

All five participants were very clear, at times extremely passionate about their love of learning. Without exception, they regarded the research study as an opportunity for learning. Through the shared experiencing of performing their wisdom imbued stories, the participants all learned more about themselves and others. The opportunities to create and recreate meaningful life experiences spontaneously, in the here and now, opened up spaces of possibility for the participants, within which deeply layered, richly textured and vibrantly messy learning could be
explored. All five participants experienced ‘aha’ moments, moments of self-awareness and insight. During workshop one Ida talked about her lack of confidence and how, “I look confident but for so long inside I am a shaking mass of jelly. I tend to think, ‘Gee, everyone is confident.’ It’s good to know others have the same experiences. I am not alone.” This kind of learning, of self-awareness and insight, created room for interstanding.

All five participants consider themselves life-long learners. At eighty-nine years of age, Violet, still loved to read and listen to music, especially music for the piano and church music. At seventy-seven, Ida, loved to read, play bridge, be involved with her senior’s association, be active in the community and politics, attend elder college and volunteer with seniors. At seventy-five, Dana, loved to read magazines including ‘The Economist,’ watch science and nature programs, sketch and paint, design and knit, attend chamber music concerts, research ways in which she can improve her health, bike, kayak and volunteer for the stroke club. At seventy-three, Laara, loved to read, paint, bake and cook. She is involved in exploring the metaphysical. Laara house sits, cared for seniors and volunteered at a cat shelter. Ahmadnia was seventy-one. She loved to read, to play table tennis, and to volunteer with seniors as a peer counselor. Ahmadnia loved the arts, especially dance and theatre. Her passion was traveling.

What follows is an excerpt from a discussion the participants experienced when they explored what learning meant to them.

Ida: That’s what I found here in the senior’s group. Seniors are incredibly active. For example, elder college. I learn something new every day. **I am a sponge for learning.**

Laara: **And being willing to step out and try even if you don’t think you can do it.**

Ahmadnia: I am Persian. A Persian poet said, “Since you are born until you die, go on learning.” Two of his poems are at the United Nations. I came to this group of learning for two reasons: to help Marianna with her thesis and for my own learning. **I learn from each of you. I learn from your words and sentences and your ideas got in my mind and that’s good.**
Only Ida had gone on to post secondary education (nursing), and the other four participants wished that they had either had the opportunity to continue their academic education when they were younger or had chosen to continue their academic education when they had the opportunity. However, all five participants were passionate about how they had embraced a different kind of education: the education of living. They were very emphatic about how they resented being condescended to or looked down upon by people who thought they were more educated because they had academic degrees. This was hurtful to them. In workshop one, Laara spoke passionately about life smarts versus academic smarts.

Laara: A little bit for me. (feeling less educated because she didn’t go to university) but I’ve got just as much smarts as anybody else. The fact that you went to school and went further doesn’t make you (the ‘academically educated’ person) a better person or a smarter person. It just makes you overconfident and rather (pauses) putting people down, perhaps without even being aware of it.

Stories of Caring For and Being Cared For

I continue to be surprised at the ‘closeness’ of the group. We are not without the odd appearance of ‘tension’ or ‘misunderstanding’ but we seem to work it out as a group and reach understanding. We work at communicating!! And the laughter. It seems a natural part of each workshop. It is so uplifting. It brings us together. It forms a bond between all of us. I sense it is integral to this research study. I am aware of a growing sense of caring among us all. To a one, we tend to Julia’s needs, although I am seeing her potential shining through, brighter and brighter and am realizing that she is gaining her voice among us. And that may be the best starting place for her. She is showing through actions and words that she would like more independence and less fussing about her!! This is a real breakthrough for all of us!!

Friday, April 30, 2004 (Marianna’s journal)

Caring for, and being cared for, resonated deeply within each of the five participants.

Throughout the six workshops, the caring attitude of women, their need to help and be selfless was manifested in numerous ways: through kind words, with loving touches and embraces,
being helpful, considerate and concerned, giving verbal and physical support, sharing helpful advice, being encouraging and sharing experiences facing the common challenges faced by each participant. Throughout the research process, the participants lived their caring, performed their caring. It was particularly moving to witness, time and time again, how Laara, Ahmadnia, Dana and Ida, all in their seventies, lovingly and instinctively cared for Violet throughout the workshops and during the video review.

One particular moment that stands out for me was during workshop one when Violet was storying and living her despair and frustration at her physical infirmities and Laara reached over and took Violet’s fragile hand in her strong hand and held on. Such a simple act of caring took on such profound meaning. That holding on infused Violet with hope. To be physically touched by caring was extremely powerful and positive. As well, the participants tended to normalize the process of aging for one another as the workshops progressed. Ida commented, “I don’t have strength in my hands.” This proved to be a common experience for all the participants. In normalizing the process of aging, the participants storied it as a natural process rather than an abhorrent or unnatural process. Laara offered the participants a practical solution for aiding in the loss of hand strength: using pliers for opening tin foil on products such as yogurt, cottage cheese, sour cream and pudding. Voice was created through the act of helping.

As the participants shared their stories of what it has meant for them to care for and about others throughout their lives, it became clear that caring consists of multiple facets. All of the women’s stories of the experience of caring included taking care of and looking after children. Even though all of their children are adults, ranging in age from their thirties to their fifties, the participants still expressed a need to care about them and a need to be cared about by them. In her ‘I Am’ piece, Ahmadnia, performed caring for her daughter but also asked, ‘What about me? Who will care about me?’ Ahmadnia storied that she was a person who worried and that for her,
with regard to her daughter, worrying and caring are entwined and she cannot separate these emotions. This caused her a lot of pain.

Ahmadnia: Because I am deeply involved with the emotion. And I very deeply care about the child I still have. I am caring about her 200% instead of 100%. And it hurt me. **That is not good!** I am always thinking about her, worrying about her, having high expectations of her. **This is not good!** She’s not the same as I want her to be. This is not possible...That is my character, my personality, to worry.

During discussion, the participants narrated their experiences of caring about their adult children for Ahmadnia’s benefit, providing her with alternate ways of caring about her daughter without worrying unduly and without having unreasonably high expectations.

Violet anguished over why her son appeared not to care about her. She pondered over where she had failed and what she had done wrong. She wished that she could have a relationship with her son; she hoped that he knew that she cared about him. Some of the women felt that they were cherished by their family; all agreed that it would be wonderful to be cherished. All the participants performed narratives of caring for others as a daughter, a mother, a sister, a friend, and a volunteer.

Ida performed stories of caring for others as a daughter, a nurse, a wife, a volunteer, an animal lover and a friend. Ahmadnia performed stories of caring for others as a sister, a grandmother, a wife long divorced, a friend and a volunteer. Dana performed stories of caring for others as a daughter, a sister, a wife, a grandmother, a friend, and a volunteer. Laara performed stories of caring for others as a daughter, a sister, a wife long divorced, a grandmother, a friend, an animal lover and a volunteer. Violet performed stories of caring for others as a daughter, a sister, a wife divorced, a wife widowed, a grandmother, a friend, an animal lover and a volunteer. All five participants spoke to the potency of caring throughout their lives and how that instilled in them, voice.
To care for others, to be needed in a way that gave their lives purpose and direction, was empowering. They zeroed in on the importance of feeling that they were needed. It gave them motivation to carry on in life. Being needed gave them purpose in life. To be needed meant that one was not useless and that one was not a burden on the ones they loved. Ida very clearly stated that she got, “no satisfaction from just pleasing myself.”

Caring for her husband’s dream has given Ida meaning and a sense of purpose in life. It has allowed her to begin to ‘remake’ her life. However, this has not happened without a lot of risk taking on the part of Ida. She storied that this has pushed her to move from her comfort zone and has allowed her to discover more of her strengths and work on her weaknesses. She has reached another life plateau and achieved more personal growth. She agreed that caring for her husband’s dream has caused her some angst as well.

Ida: Having lost my husband gave me the drive to complete the senior’s center and to complete his dream gave me the drive to get up every morning. It was a godsend...I do have this drive to accomplish and achieve things...Now I’m moving into another phase of life. Now I have time just for me. To dawdle. I’m happy about this. I was living at too fast a pace. I was too conscientious. I was dealing with too many different personalities. This bothered me because I like to get along with people. I would go back over things. I lost sleep. I’m moving into another phase of life now.

Both Ida and Ahmadnia, agreed that they felt and, at times, overwhelming sense of responsibility not to let people down and that this can easily cause them to burn out.

In workshop two when Violet was feeling frustrated and disgusted with herself with what she perceived to be her physical and physiological inadequacies (weakness, clumsiness, slowness, forgetting), Ahmadnia, who was very tired herself, showed concern and caring for Violet by reassuring her that she was not alone.

Ahmadnia: (to Violet) Don’t be worried. Everybody’s tired. Everybody’s weak. Especially those people who have chronic diseases.

Each participant felt that it was important for them to feel loved and to feel that they belonged. They were reassured that they all felt the same way. Interestingly enough, when the participants
performed their “I Am” pieces, they narrated the desire to care and be cared for. Here are excerpts from their work.

Laara: And I, I am a caring, loving person for most of the people I know... I, I’m trusting the universe more and more each day that I will always be taken care of and cherished... I am a loving, caring person for myself and others and may I always be needed and loved now and always.

Ahmadnia: I am a caring person, unfortunately I don’t like always caring... about the people... What about me?? I love some people care about me too!

Dana: I think we need the togetherness with people and to be happy with people and realize how hugging is so important and helping people is very important and that’s what I try to do... I like to help people. I like to encourage people to do the best they can.

Ida: I have volunteered for years in some capacity... And I give of myself to my family and my relationships.

Violet: I like my friends and I love some of them. They are so friendly and they have helped me so greatly. I appreciate the help I get from them. I am compassionate. I try to help wherever I can... I hope that I might have a year or two of life so maybe I can do something for someone.

Stories of Fear of Becoming a Burden

I ask myself, “How can society ease this seemingly pervasive fear among a large portion of the older population?” What constitutes a burden? What for one person might be a burden, for another, is not. Reciprocity. What constitutes reciprocity with regard to our elders?

Friday, April 30, 2004 (Marianna’s journal)

Fear of becoming a burden was on the minds of all the participants. The women performed stories that eloquently expressed their concern at losing their independence and their absolute refusal to become a burden on their children. Ahmadnia, Laara, Ida and Violet, either divorced or widowed, also narrated their difficulty in asking people for help. Complete loss of independence was something the participants agreed was frightening for them. The thought that family members, especially their children, might have to care for them was an anathema to them. Laara revealed in her ‘I Am’ piece that, “that’s the only time I’ve ever said to myself, I would
rather take my own life, than to be a burden.” In discussion, Ida, stated, “My main fear is like many of us. I fear becoming completely incapacitated, physically or mentally, and thus becoming a burden to my sons.”

During a discussion in workshop five, the researcher asked the participants to clarify their position regarding fearing becoming a burden on their family. This was quite an animated discussion. Obviously the possibility of becoming a burden on their children weighed quite heavily on the participants.

Marianna: Everybody basically talked about the fact that they didn’t want to be a burden on their family as they aged. Am I correct on that?

Laara: **Oh yes!**

Ida: Yes!

Ahmadnia: (nods in agreement)

Dana: Yes!

Violet: Yes!

Marianna: What do you mean by a burden?

Laara: If I was sick and had to rely on someone else to give me care.

Dana: I think we all worry about that.

Ida: Yeah. I wouldn’t expect intimate care from my kids. If I became really incapacitated, I would have to go somewhere. And I wouldn’t be a financial burden to them but it would certainly be, it would disrupt their lives enormously...I’m not afraid to die, but I wouldn’t want them to find me...

Ahmadnia: ...the thing is, for example, if anything happen to you, for example, heart attack or stroke...Something, and you be disabled, that is very **difficult. This is always my fear** because after that I think I don’t like anybody care about me. **I like to do everything by myself.** (Ida nods in agreement) I don’t want anybody help me and in that situation I need help. (Ida nods in agreement) And that is the most problem and most fear which I have in my life.

Marianna: Have your independence!

(All the participants say ‘yeah’ and/or nod in agreement)
During session five, Laara, participated even though she had been injured trying to separate two frightened cats. Her hand and arm had suffered bites and scratches and she was on pain killers. She initiated an interesting discussion on the difficulty of asking for help.

Laara: Yesterday I found that I had to accept a friend’s help to go up to feed the cats that I take care of. And to ask, to ask somebody to do that for me – that is really hard for me, to ask for help!

(all the participants nod in agreement and there is a chorus of ‘yesses’)

Marianna: So you’re really talking about how hard it is to accept help?

Laara: (nods) Ooohhh!!

Marianna: To ask for help.

Laara: To ask!

Marianna: Does everyone feel the same?

(all the participants agree emphatically that it is hard to ask for help)

Ahmadnia: Always you like to give but you don’t like anybody helping you... I don’t let anyone help me until it will be really, really necessary.

Laara: Tell me about it!

Ahmadnia: The people who need help, they don’t come to you. They are shy.

Marianna: Is it because we’re too proud? I’ve always been like that. It’s my nature...

Ahmadnia: And that is very difficult when you need help. You should used to it, little by little accept help.

(The participants nod in agreement)

Ida: There’s something in us all, I think, that’s almost embarrassing. We feel that we’ve failed.

Participants: (chorus of yeses)

Marianna: Maybe we need to practice asking for help.

(Participants agree)

Ida: Only if it’s a medical emergency, I’ll ask for help.
Dana: But it doesn’t hurt to ask somebody for help.

Marianna: No, it’s a good thing!

(We all agree, but we also agree that it’s hard to do)

Ahmadnia: It is hard, but we should get used to doing it because other people ask for help and we help them...

Marianna: If they come to me and ask to help, I’m happy. But to actually ask for help...

(Ida emphatically nods in agreement)

Laara: For you to go out and ask for help, that’s another kettle of fish.

(Everybody agrees)

Stories of Being Challenged

I am particularly struck by the courage these women have mustered to face and see through life’s challenges and of their staying power!!! Giving up on someone or something is an anathema to them!!!

Tuesday, March 16, 2004 (Marianna’s journal)

Throughout their lives, all of the five participants in the research study have faced and continue to face challenges. Challenges included premature birth, death of a parent in childhood or adolescence, having to help support a surviving parent and younger siblings after the death of a parent, dealing with low self-confidence because a parent consistently demeaned you, coping with the accidental death of a child while under your care, leaving your family and your country of birth and learning to live in a new country, raising children in quickly changing times, divorce, death of a spouse, chronic illness, strokes, giving up things we love because we cannot do them any more, loss of physical energy and strength, a less elastic memory, death of siblings, death of friends, loneliness, prejudice, racism, financial insecurity, and invisibility. The one thing that all the five participants storied in common was taking up the challenge of working through their problems and of not giving up when faced with what seemed like unbearable or insurmountable events. In essence, all five women have been challenged to, as Ida narrated,
“remake” their lives. All five participants were fighters. Their stories were stories of resilience. As their physical strength waned, their inner strength grew.

During workshop four, Laara, performed a story of how she inadvertently challenged herself to hike up a mountain that her son and his friends had hiked up.

Laara: And one morning they said they were going to do, they were going to climb to the top of the mountain, so I finished my chores and then I went up to the top of the mountain and my son is up there and he said, “What are you doing up here?” And I said, “Well I wanted to see the top of the mountain as well…” But my son just couldn’t get over the fact that I climbed the mountain. He already had me labeled as old. (shakes her head)

For Laara, climbing the mountain was an accomplishment that exhilarated her. By climbing the mountain she encountered a different kind of challenge: being viewed as old by her son. For the five women in my study, being over seventy did not only mean that they faced the challenges of the infirmities that come with aging, but that they constantly faced the perceptions of society that because they were older, they were not capable of even attempting other kinds of challenges.

Dana storied her experiences with older people who look at life negatively. For Dana, welcoming the challenge of remaining positive was a key ingredient in empowering herself. Positive self-talk was a strategy that all five women incorporated in their challenge to keep on having voice. All five women performed the challenge that it takes to remain positive as you grow older. In the following exchange, Dana narrates her experience of finding voice through remaining positive.

Dana: I try not to say the words, ‘can’t,’ ‘won’t,’ ‘don’t,’ or ‘shouldn’t.’ And none of us shouldn’t ‘should’ ourselves. And you have to catch yourself from saying that. And I have to catch myself from saying those things.

Marianna: And maybe as we get older it happens more often.

Dana: Well, it gets worse as we get older. But you hear people talk like that. And that’s a negative. You’ve got to be more positive... When you’re in a relationship, you’ve got to give all you’ve got to that relationship. And too often I see the negative part of people’s marriages. She goes that way; he goes that way. My husband and I have always gone together. And I think more people should do that. And they’ll get a lot more out of life if they do...
Ahmadnia storiied how challenging it is for all the generations to live a meaningful life in societies that have become fast paced and concerned with amassing a lot of material goods. She eloquently performed life today as “the machine’s life” wherein sensitivity and emotion are “finished” and family life has changed dramatically. Ahmadnia spoke to the challenge of where one fits or belongs (the oldest and the youngest generations) when the children of the latter and the parents of the former don’t have time for them because they are “running, running.”

Both Ida and Ahmadnia came to Canada from different countries and literally challenged themselves to remake their lives. During workshop four, Ahmadnia narrated her experience of challenging and being challenged when she first came to Canada.

Ahmadnia: When I came to Canada, my English was not good but I did everything by myself. If necessary, I asked for help. Challenge yourself and you will survive in other countries. I push myself...I always put myself in a scary place.

This is Ahmadnia’s performance of survival, her story of courage, of independence and of risking.

One of the performative inquiry activities that took place during workshop five was inspired by a poem by Fran Portley entitled “Endurance,” a poem that expressed how women face and endure never ending challenges. “Endurance” was one piece in a collection of writing and photography in “When I Am An Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple.” The participants were invited, one at a time, to read the poem aloud. It was magic! Each woman committed to the poem, totally focused and absorbed with what they were reading. Their voices were loud and clear. All five participants connected deeply with the poem. I asked the women to take a moment and come forward and reflect on how they would complete the following statement: This poem makes me feel--------- because---------.. Then, individually, each participant
performed their experience of the poem for the rest of the group. The performed work, as well as part of the debriefing/discussion that ensued, follows:

Ahmadnia: This poem makes me think that women are wonderful. They are as mother, as wife, as friends, as worker, and as housewife. The woman who can do every thing in this time of the century is the woman who are wonderful.

Ida: It makes me feel satisfied because I think it's a wonderful analogy. Mountain flowers, they have a very hard time surviving and I think this is an analogy for women's lives and some of what we go through in our lives.

Laara: This poem makes me feel that there are sisters that I have throughout this world who have endured and lived, have suffered, have mastered many things in order to maintain and hold a family together and like the flowers that grow in the Alps we are hardened by everything that is done to us. We endure and we absorb all the good that comes to us. We have long roots simply because family is everything.

Dana: Well I feel that all the women in this room have expressed themselves very well... I know I feel the way they talked... You know over the years you do a lot of things and you realize you know a lot of things, probably more than you give yourself credit for.

Violet: It takes me back many years. See the flowers around the crevices in rocks. A real nice feeling. We went away from the cities and on the beaches. It brings me back to that. Uhm. We didn't have enough wind and snow. But it was cold. We endured. We absorbed the brief sun.

Ahmadnia: I think the women are the root of family. The women are hard like mountain and women, especially, close to the mother which brought them here, is very wonderful. Women doing everything in their family and their society. They are as writer, doctor, as nurses, they are as worker, as genius, everything. Women. **Women are the root of their society too.** Specially in family, woman has very, very high position, in my opinion. If the women be nothing, not existing in each family, this family has disaster.

Ida: Women and wives are usually the glue that holds the family together.

Ahmadnia: The thing is, the family, and in this society most people think the man is very tough and very patient but, in my opinion, I saw in many different families, the woman, more tougher and more patient, and they can handle everything in very bad situations and rough situations, better than men.

Marianna: It (the poem, “Endurance”) speaks to that, the toughness of women. They become stronger and tougher with every challenge they face.

Ida: (agrees and nods) Every challenge that you either overcome or learn to work through.

Later on, during the same discussion, something amazing happened. Violet, spontaneously, clearly and strongly, reclaimed her voice. For the first time, without being asked,
invited or encouraged, she spoke out and her voice was passionate, eloquent and unstoppable.

She seized the moment.

Violet: I am getting the wrong reading from this (referring to the poem, “Endurance”).

Marianna: No. I think you are taking it literally.

Violet: No! (blocks Marianna) I don’t understand how the men got into this (points to the poem).

Marianna: Oh no, this has nothing to do with the poem.

Dana: That’s because I said that men don’t iron. (laughs)

Marianna: I was just alluding back to the poem, back to what Ahmadnia said about women tending to be stronger and more patient. That’s what her experience has been.

Violet: Yeah. I, maybe I don’t, I just see what I read (gestures with her hands) and then I,

Laara: Take it literally.

Violet: (refuses to have anyone else speak for her) And then I don’t know where to go from there. I mean, it doesn’t bring me back to my family or anything...

Ahmadnia: Yeah, that’s right, but we talk about it.

Violet: That’s for you. Your experience.

Marianna: (moves and sits beside Violet and puts her arm around her shoulders) I just have to say something because this is one of the few times that Violet has actually voiced, without me asking, what’s going on for her and that takes courage and that’s what she’s been working on.

Violet: (smiling)

Ahmadnia: She’s doing very well. Wonderful!

Marianna: But she voiced it (referring to Violet’s concern) very loud.

Ahmadnia: Violet does everything very well. (says to Violet) I love you. Really, you are doing a great job.

Marianna: Very good. Because we (Violet and myself) were talking in the car, on the way home, and also in the piece on who she is that she wrote, that she wants to speak up in a group.
A huge challenge at that particular time in Violet’s life was for her to find a way to empower herself to speak up in a group. Violet was able to use immediacy to experience coming to voice within a safe environment. Hopefully she will be able to extend this experience to situations that are not as safe and in which she will have to risk more.

Stories of Loneliness, Exclusion and Invisibility

Even though I know mentally that, in general, people need to be listened to in a genuine, caring manner that conveys unconditional positive regard, I am still moved to great reflection, at times sadness, at how appreciative the women have been to have been able to talk to me and speak their experiences and stories. Every lady tells me how much she enjoyed talking and re-visiting her stories. Everyone also apologized for “talking so much.”

In some aspects, I feel angry that more people are not listening to these women. I question why their stories of pain, responsibility, commitment, challenge, grief, love, dignity and acceptance do not have a wider audience, especially among youth!!! I can’t help but think that, as literature suggests, too many young people are missing out on a positive life-transforming and meaningful experience by not being in an intimate relationship with a member of the older generation. Stories of courage, of turning lives around, of seeing things through, of not giving up, of forgiveness, of loyalty and commitment and of hope are not being shared with a wider audience.

Tuesday, March 16, 2004 (Marianna’s journal)

Ida, Violet, Laara, Ahmadnia and Dana agreed that loneliness was the greatest challenge that women over seventy faced. Dana storied her experiences of other people’s loneliness. Happily married for over half a century, Dana felt extremely fortunate to have a living spouse and not to have experienced her own personal loneliness. Violet, Ida, Laara and Ahmadnia storied their personal battles with loneliness. All five participants attested to the experiences of exclusion and feeling invisible that came more and more as they aged. When I asked the
participants whether or not they had experienced being lonely, they responded in the affirmative and excerpts of their narratives follow.

Ahmadnia: I am, I am lonely.

Ida: Once your spouse dies, life is different. Yes, there is a loneliness.

Laara: And your dogs are great, but they are not a sounding board.

(Laara went on to admit that her cats could not make up for human companionship)

Violet: (responding to being asked if she experienced loneliness) Oh yes. A lot. I don't like eating alone.

Ida: It's very hard to start going out again as a single person...I force myself, I don't really want to go, to do it because to keep your friends you have to do it. I still sometimes force myself to go out in order to have a life.

Dana: The social part of things is very important when you get older. Sometimes you don't feel like doing something but you tell yourself to go.

Ida: Every one's wonderful at the time of loss, but then it's up to you to get out and remake your life.

The four participants who lived alone performed stories of pushing themselves to lead more social lives. They narrated awareness that it was their responsibility to make the effort to nurture old friendships and form new acquaintances.

Ida attributed being and feeling excluded to going back to not being confident. She still had doubts about whether or not she was doing the right thing. She practiced self-talk, as did all the participants, to bolster her confidence and help her be proactive in engaging socially. All the participants have used the words, "force myself" to describe how they often empower themselves to socialize. Laara referred to "being left out" and said she "doesn't exist" since her neighbor and friend acquired a "new gentleman." Laara declared that, "I don't intrude, ever, on couples."

Ida concurred with Laara and reflected that other women can be jealous when a friend whose spouse or partner is gone through death or divorce continues to be part of the social circle.

Ida: The world is geared around couples. I don't flirt anymore. But when my husband was alive I'd flirt, but we all knew it didn't mean
anything. Now I do nothing that can be misconstrued.

In discussion, Ahmadnia and Violet communicated their experiences of being ignored, of being excluded. It hurt them to be ignored. It hurt them when other people were ignored.

Ahmadnia: Many people are ignored. I’ve been ignored sometimes. Also, when you are younger you feel very happy, very free and you don’t think about a distance, but when you get older, you will be more mature and you will be more sensitive, more understanding...Some people in this society ignore you when you are very old and this happens many times and people get hurt.

Violet: Yes!! Ignored. Being left out of a conversation. I don’t like being Ignored...Maybe I’m oversensitive.

Laara performed feeling “invisible” and that “no notice was paid” when she was ignored. Ida performed that “it shatters your confidence” when you are ignored. Violet performed that when she was excluded from a conversation it “hurts.” Ahamdnia performed that society “include the silent and ignored in conversation...some people are proud and can’t mention that I feel left out.” Dana performed that she “draws in people” and makes sure that everyone has someone to talk to. Laara performed her ‘former’ life as a tour escort and how she always tried to get a diverse group of people to become “a melting pot so they accepted one another.” All the participants voiced how essential it was for older people to empower themselves to build connections with others.

Only Ahmadnia and Ida participated in workshop three. During the opening discussion these two participants communicated their feelings about what they considered to be the alienation of the elderly from mainstream society. They voiced their concern that in Western society, aging is viewed as something to be avoided at all costs, a disease. During other workshops, the five participants were in consensus that aging was viewed as something negative rather than as a normal and natural life course. Ida commented that growing old was viewed by society as, “shameful” and that older people who attempt to age gracefully are often blamed for
showing their age. Ahmadnia related a simple story wherein an acquaintance saw a photo of her
from approximately twenty years ago and couldn’t believe it was Ahmadnia. In a shocked voice
she asked Ahmadnia, “Is that you?” This hurt Ahmadnia. In workshop four, a conversation
between Violet, Ida and Laara touched on how the way we look physically as we age may not
coincide with the image we hold inside. There was a huge discrepancy between what their
external mirror showed and what their internal mirror revealed.

Violet: I never thought of being old even in my fifties and sixties and
seventies. I guess I was just lucky that I didn’t have anything really wrong
with me and I still could do most things.

Ida: But you don’t feel any different inside, you’re still the same person.

Violet: Yes. It’s the physical stuff.

Laara: It’s the body that doesn’t come, stay with the image we have inside.

During session three Ida and Ahmadnia reflected upon not having someone to share their
lives with. Ahmadnia told her story of how no man that has been interested in her can compare
to the memory that she holds of her ex-husband, a man who was ‘handsome,’ ‘well-dressed,’
‘rich,’ ‘generous,’ and ‘well-educated.’ In her mind and heart, no man can compare to her ex-
husband.

Ahmadnia: For a long time I compared them, but no more. If I didn’t
marry I was more lucky and better. Some people are not to be a housewife.
Some people are not meant to be a mother. I am like that. If I didn’t marry
I would have had a better life. I think so.

Ida referred to her husband as her soul mate and storied how they were the other half of each
other. She reflected that her life had changed a lot as a result of his death and that she was lonely
not having someone to share life events with.

Ida: While I would not object to having friendship with some men,
at my stage of life the selection is practically zero…Some men are just
looking for a housekeeper cum nurse. Thank you, no way!!!! I just
now don’t see myself in being interested having a relationship. To
have a man friend to go to movies and travel with would be okay. But to get involved emotionally, I don’t think I want to do that. I am content; I have no financial worries. I don’t need to look for someone to share my life. Yes, it’s lonely.

Both Ida and Ahmadnia reflected on the fact that they were fortunate enough to be financially secure. They knew seniors who struggled financially and felt, as Ida reflected, that, “at this stage of life it is unfortunate.” Having no financial security can make older people make decisions, with regard to relationships, that end up being disastrous.

Laara, Ida and Ahmadnia storied that they faced a dilemma: between having independence and being lonely. The participants valued their independence, but they also acknowledged, that at times, they were lonely not having someone special to share their lives with.

Ahmadnia: To be lonely is not good, is not fair, you have very bad time sometime. And some freedom. And some worse time. You choose it. But you can handle it. You prefer to have all that problem and be by yourself.

Marianna: Have your independence.

All the Participants: (nodding) Yeah!!!

Ahmadnia: And be independent especially!

Near the end of workshop six, I asked the participants what society can do to make a positive difference in the lives of older people. They all had a story to tell.

Dana: They (society) need more tolerance of the older person. (rubs her chin, looks upward) And kindness. And hugs. That’s most important! They need to feel that they’re loved. And wanted. (makes a circular motion with her arms to demonstrate inclusion) Not just cast aside. (moves her arm in a sweeping aside motion) Which seems to be the feeling. Especially on the roads. They think, “Well look at that old fart! What can we do with her?” (laughs)

Ahmadnia: I think the young people should be gathered with the old people because the young people are the future of the country…they should get some experience about the old people. They should not think they (older people) have no ideas, that they are old, their minds are old and so on. You should educate the young people and get some experience about
old people...the young people are the future of each country because we (older people) are finished anyhow.

Violet: I think young people now are coming to understand a bit about getting old, maybe, communicating with them, doing things with them. I think they (the young) need to consider them (the old) and not dislike them and want them to die off...

Role of the Researcher

At this moment I do feel like a gardener tending a rather beautiful garden, a garden that has many surprises in store for me from which I will harvest knowledge, insight and wonder, but not without care, hard work, imagination and patience. A garden that ultimately will decide its own palette, its own rate of growth and its own strengths and weaknesses. A garden that will decide its own course. A garden that throughout its design, construction, maintenance and life will have much to teach if the gardener is willing to learn.

Tuesday, March 16, 2004 (Marianna’s journal)

In general, the role of the researcher was to collect and analyze data and present it in a communicable format. Specifically, the researcher was a co-collaborator during the research process of interviewing and workshoping. The researcher journaled throughout the research study process. In ethnoperformance, the researcher was both a teacher and a student just as the participants were both teachers and students. Like the participants, the researcher had a ‘thirst for learning.’

Richardson (2000, p. 254) succinctly summed up my desire as an ethnographer, especially a performative ethnographer, when she reflected on how ethnography became visible through sound research practices but researchers should not be trapped within the boundaries set by the mindset of other researchers.

Ethnography is always situated in human activity, bearing both the strengths and limitation of human perceptions and feelings. Ethnography is always
The researcher was responsible for initially creating the performative inquiry activities and facilitating a safe and encouraging atmosphere in which the participants could explore the activities and, hopefully, move into spaces of learning (borderlands) where there were possibilities for change and transformation. Initially the researcher was responsible for initiating activities that created the freedom for the generation of ideas, awareness, and insight with the hope that the participants would then carry on the potential for this generative process throughout the workshops and into their lives post research study. Sometimes the researcher took part in the activities, other times she observed.

Initially the researcher helped both Violet and Ahmadnia (at times, the researcher engaged the videographer to help Ahmadnia while she was working with Violet) by writing down their reflections with regard to certain activities. By the fourth workshop, Ahmadnia felt confident enough to write down her own reflections. By the sixth workshop, Violet was empowered to work with the group, and individually, without the aid of the researcher, to perform her stories.

Initially, the researcher was in charge of the group, but as the individuals in the group became more confident and more comfortable working together, the researcher became more of a contributing member of the group and less of a ‘boss.’ Initially the researcher co-created an environment within which both participants and researcher would have numerous opportunities to share in possibilities for meaning-making, self-awareness and insight. I agreed with Freeman (2000, pp. 368-369), that as a researcher I carried huge social responsibility.

As a participant in the creation of meanings, I carry an enormous social responsibility. Meanings are not only created but also transformed through our
The researcher attempted to model ways of being that would be conducive to empowerment such as immediacy, engaging one’s audience, listening, trying not to judge, spontaneity, forthrightness, not being afraid to make mistakes and not striving for perfection, questioning, curiosity, patience, caring, enthusiasm, showing appreciation for the efforts of others and risk taking. An integral part of the researcher’s role was working with the participants to create choices and options and to support them in their choice-making, so that the group practiced many different ways of empowering themselves. The researcher was responsible for conducting a research study process in which both participants and researcher experienced reciprocity.

Reciprocity

Research incorporating ethnoperformance demands that the process be reciprocal for the participants as well as the researcher. The participants have given time and effort to the research study. In this particular study, the participants participated in a pre-workshop informal conversational interview. They attended six workshops over a period of two months. They participated in a post-workshop informal conversational interview, and they came together to watch and discuss video clips of their workshops. Ahmadnia, Violet, Ida, Dana and Laara showed dedication and commitment throughout the entire research study process. What did the research study give back to them? Russell & Bohan (1999, p. 404) mentioned that as researchers we sometimes fail to reciprocate our participants by not “giving back to those we study the knowledge we have gained from listening to their voices.” Each participant received a copy of the research study thesis.
All five participants experienced belonging to a group within which they were encouraged to try new things. They were given an opportunity to perform their stories of experience and learning in a way that was unique to most of them. They were willing to risk stepping out of their comfort level to perform their stories. They all had fun. As Laara stated and the other participants reiterated, the group created a safe place within which they could individually and as a group, express their stories. The group voice that the participants created was inclusive, communicative, curious, wise, caring, friendly and committed to learning.

At the end of workshop six, each participant voiced what they would take with them from the ethnoperformance process. The women gained awareness and insight into themselves and others through the ethnoperformance process. They certainly found their voice, reclaimed their voice, or strengthened their voice. Ida referred to having had an interesting experience. She found it “comforting” to know that they all “shared” differences, commonalities, experiences and ideas. She felt that the workshops reminded her of the memoir course that she had done in elder college and that she got, “insight into people’s journeys” and how they had “come to this stage.” She said that both the research study and the memoir course had sent her “on a backward look at my whole life and how we acquire wisdom with life.” Ida felt that we had “only scratched the surface” because there were only six workshops. She was thinking a lot more about how “we all express ourselves in so many other ways besides verbally.”

Ahmadnia was interested in the different experiences, different opinions, and different ideas of the participants in the group. She said that from the research study, “I like, I get social experience; from each situation I get something.” Ahmadnia stated that, “I understand more about people” and “I learned to have more patience, understanding and caring about people than before.” As well, Ahmadnia mentioned how she felt that there is no “harmony” between the younger and the older generations. She would like to see the young and the old “mix together in meaningful ways.”
Throughout the research process, Dana commented on how much she had learned from the other participants. At the end of workshop six she stated that she “learned from the women a lot of things” and that, “If I had the words, I would have said the same things as the others.” Dana was comforted to hear that the participants in the group had experienced things that she had experienced. Dana said that she appreciated the “giving and the getting back” that occurred within the group.

Violet enjoyed the research process and stated that if she hadn’t been involved in it, “I never would have been speaking out like this.” She was ‘glad’ that she participated in the study because, at first, her thoughts about her ability to become a member of the group were very negative. She confided to us that, “at first I thought this isn’t for me. I shouldn’t join this, maybe all the people are more clever than me.” The ethnoperformance process helped Violet climb out of her shell and find her voice. It infused her with hope and effective strategies to begin rebuilding her confidence.

Laara found a safe space within the research process to express her thoughts and feelings with eloquence. She became a member of a group that did not judge her, but instead listened to her. Laara stated that, “I gained an insight that a lot of senior citizens are way out in left field and really struggling to make some sense in how they can survive.”
CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

Violet: It (the aging town) needs people who see potential in this town, to do something about it.

As noted in the previous chapter, during the process of the conversational interviews, the six performative inquiry workshops, the follow up individual conversations, and the post workshop video viewing, six main stories or thematic narratives were of personal relevance to all five participants. The stories were loss of physical health, energy and strength, love of learning, caring for others and being cared about by others, fear of becoming a burden, especially on one's children, being challenged, and loneliness, including exclusion and or invisibility. How did the results of this study relate to the extant literature on aging?

Loss

A lot of the literature on aging had focused on the deficits that exist in the older population with regard to losses pertaining to physical health. Unfortunately, most of that literature had not explored how these deficits can be balanced with gains. Much of the literature centered on debilitating health issues such as dementia, high blood pressure, heart problems, strokes, cancer, diabetes, arthritis, hearing loss, and other chronic diseases. While all the participants had suffered or were suffering from debilitating health issues, during the research study they were more concerned with the effects that strength and energy loss were having on the quality of their life. So, what impact did something seemingly so simple, but obviously so pervasive - the loss of physical strength and energy - have on the aging population? The loss of physical strength and energy was of great concern to Violet, Ahmandnia, Laara, Ida, and Dana, the five participants in the research study. It had the potential to greatly frustrate the participants
and diminish the quality of their lifestyle. Yet the literature reviewed in chapter two either very briefly alluded to aging and loss of physical strength and energy or completely ignored it.

In Barlow and Williams' paper (1999), older women with arthritis were targeted as an area for research and participated in the process of a Personal Independence Course that empowered them to agency. The results suggested that learning and practicing confidence building strategies were agentic. Certainly the participants in my research study learned and practiced, what was for most of them, totally new ways of empowerment or confidence building or boostering.

Aronson's study (2002) targeted older frail women with a range of chronic health problems. The women in my study all experienced chronic health problems. In fact, most of them had more than one chronic health problem. The older they got, the more they struggled to live with these problems and still maintain a satisfactory quality of life.

Rennemark and Hagberg's study (1997) described how aging equals both change and loss. Violet, Ida, Dana, Laara and Ahmadnia storied eloquently about how as they aged they were faced with more changes and more losses. They spoke to waking up every day and never knowing how much effort it will take them just to get up and get going. All five women narrated how much will power it took for them to maintain a meaningful quality of life and the words "force myself" were used by all of them to describe how they often motivated themselves to action. All five participants storied profoundly how, as they aged, they experienced giving up more and more of the things they loved.

Morell's study (2003) focused on women in 'old' old age and how both strength and weakness co-exist. Results from my research study suggested that five women, ranging in age from seventy-one to eighty-nine, all possessed growing inner strength while experiencing the effects of diminishing physical strength and energy. Violet, Ida, Dana, Laara and Ahmadnia all possessed strength of character and wisdom that they storied powerfully throughout the research
process. However, it appeared that they were not always allotted a venue to share their strengths with a larger segment of society.

It would be interesting to explore further the question of whether or not women under eighty-five years of age benefit as much as women eighty-five and older from embodied empowerment. Would embodied empowerment process activities like performative inquiry for women seventy to eighty-five aid them in maintaining their voice after eighty-five? Would these activities provide women in old age the coping strategies to bolster against what Baltes and Baltes (1998) refer to as “more dysfunctionality and fewer positive emotions”?

Thirst for Learning

Erikson and Erikson (1997) and Carlsen (1991) spoke to the necessity of meaningful and creative aging and how this is tied into older people’s love and need for learning. As mentioned previously, a lot of the literature on the aging population dealt with the problems that come with aging, especially zeroing in on the deficits of old age and ‘old’ old age. The Erikson’s speak to the attitude of shame and negativity within which Western society frames its view of the older individual, seeing the elderly as ‘all lumped in the same category’ rather than as a dynamic, creative, visionary generation seeking knowledge, awareness and insight, still loving learning and desiring to share a generation of learning.

The five very diverse participants in my research study spoke to their love of learning, admitting that they were ‘thirsty’ for learning and agreeing that they soaked up learning like a ‘sponge.’ Carlsen (1991) was passionate about her belief that the elderly generation longs to age creatively and, given the opportunity, will learn in ways that are as unique and individual as each one of them is. Violet, Ahmadnia, Ida, Laara and Dana proved that they were willing, able and enthusiastically motivated to learn in unique ways throughout the six workshops. Never once did they back down, even during those occasions when it must have felt like they were walking a tightrope.
Pfeiffer (1999) powerfully advocated for allowing older individual’s ‘expert’ voices their rightful place in society. The participants in my study, five women over seventy, were the experts on aging exactly like Pfeiffer stated. They were indeed ‘teachable,’ ‘interdependent of their families,’ ‘individually unique,’ ‘engaging storytellers’ and ‘a sensitive barometer of what works and what doesn’t.’ Violet, Ida, Dana, Laara and Ahmadnia storied passionately that other generations (younger generations) had never walked in their shoes, certainly not experienced their age and the strengths, limitations and wisdom that should come with age. They pointed out, however, that they had all walked in the shoes of the younger generations. The oldest generation encompasses all ages, and thus, in a broad sense, all experiences. The participants were very generous in pointing this out.

Fisher and Specht (1999) explored creativity and its relation to successful aging. When spaces were created for possibility, personal growth and learning were encouraged. It would be valuable to conduct a research study that included the creation and performance of seniors’ participant stories for a conference or exhibition to discover what elements of positive aging, if any, were illuminated.

Overall, literature focusing on the love of learning among the oldest generations seemed to be scarce. Literature that told the stories of women over seventy exploring issues and concerns meaningful to them via creative activities such as performative inquiry activities was either non-existent or briefly alluded to in the literature review. Having observed the enthusiasm, acuity and humor that the participants in my study brought to each performative inquiry activity and discussion, and having noted the energy and awareness and the questioning and ‘aha’ moments that ensued from performative inquiry, I feel strongly that ethnoperformance encourages the possibility of rich, meaningful learning among individuals of our older generations.
Ethnoperformance was not only a new and unique experience of learning for the five participants in the study, but was new and unique among extant literature focusing on aging. It would be beneficial to do further research in the brand new field of the elderly and ethnoperformance to discover whether or not there was a limited number of women over seventy who loved to learn and whether they were the only ones who were willing to participate in research studies using ethnoperformance. In this way, the findings and theories of both the Eriksons and Carlsen with regard to creativity, generativity, and transformation will be able to be further explored and, perhaps, even expanded on.

Need to Love and be Loved

The five participants in my research study all attested to the need and desire to both care for others and to be cared about by others. All five women agreed that caring for others, from the smallest supportive touch to volunteering, enabled them a powerful voice. It was evident throughout all six workshops that the participants, through kind, encouraging words, supportive touching, demonstrations, inspirational stories, listening, and giving physical help and pragmatic advice to each other, lived their love of caring. The Eriksons (1997) referred to generativity and how it can be attained only if older women are allowed to care for others; this is a need that must be fulfilled in order for them to be generative. However, there doesn’t seem to be the same amount of information on the importance of older women being cared about.

Roberto, Allen and Bliezner’s project (1999) explored the importance of intergenerational relationships and discovered the meaning that older women place in terms of their family and the rich contribution that older women have made to family life. Qualls (2000) and Florsheim and Herr (1990) reiterated the pivotal role of family in the lives of the elderly, especially with regard to emotional and physical support. All five of my participants stressed the importance of their children and grandchildren in their lives and how their families came first in their lives, even in times of stress. Ahmadnia, Dana, Ida, Violet and Laara all spoke of how
much they loved their children and of how much they appreciated, counted on and valued them at this time of their life. All five women spoke to the importance to their quality of life of having a strong family support system including a spouse, children, and/or siblings. A study that explores the reciprocity or perhaps, lack of reciprocity, between women from the oldest generation who have cared for their children and grandchildren, and those children and grandchildren who have been cared for by their mothers and grandmothers would provide a rich backdrop for performance ethnography.

Aquino, Russell, Cutrona and Altmayer’s study (1996) found a positive correlation between volunteer work and life satisfaction among seniors and that the volunteers saw themselves as being cared for and supported by the community. Violet, Ida, Laara, Dana, and Ahmadnia were passionate about how volunteering gave back to them far more than they gave in terms of life satisfaction, self-esteem, support from the community, and belonging. Literature has been pretty clear about the valuable contribution to volunteering that seniors have made.

I questioned whether or not enough focus has been placed on the importance of seniors feeling that they are loved and cared for and valued in extant literature. What happens when older individuals are no longer physically or mentally able to participate in the volunteering community? Where do they then find this sense of being cared for, of being worthwhile, of being valued? How as a society can we become creative and provide meaningful and interesting ways in which the less physically or mentally able older individual can still feel that he or she is contributing. The most heart rending moments in the research study process came when Violet, in frustration and despair, cried, “I am useless” and “I am stupid.” Older women who feel they have a meaningful place in society do not feel ‘useless’ or ‘stupid.’
Fear of Becoming a Burden

The stories of fear of becoming a burden were narrated throughout the entire research study. This concern about losing one's independence and having to rely on others, especially one's children, was especially worrisome to the four participants who were either widowed or divorced. Stories of fear of becoming a burden were related over and over again. Surprisingly, the literature that I reviewed did not discuss this concern. Perhaps in Western society's search for an escape from growing old, focus has not been directed toward the reality that as we age we become less independent and more interdependent and this leads to us needing more and more help from society, including our families.

Florsheim and Herr (1990) touch on the fact that older people tend to have been raised with a more stoical attitude and have greater difficulty asking for help or talking about their problems than do the younger generations. As counselors, how do we reach women over seventy? How do we reassure them that they are not failures because they need to ask for help? Except for Dana, the participants felt an overwhelming difficulty in asking for help. They felt embarrassed to ask for help. For the participants in my study, getting together and working through issues such as fear of being a burden and shame in asking for help, whether through performative activities or discussion, was a huge relief. To know that other individuals share your fears is very comforting. More research needs to be done regarding whether or not a large segment of elderly individuals fear becoming a burden to society in general and their children specifically. If the findings support this fear, then ways in which we can address this concern and alleviate it could go a long way to making older women’s lives less stressful.

Facing Challenges

The stories of Ida, Laara, Dana, Ahmadnia and Violet were testimonies to lives that have faced and taken on many challenges. The Erikson’s (1997) pointed out the challenges that the older individual was faced with in society by virtue of being viewed as decrepit, revolting, and
contemptible. Carlsen (1991) spoke to the challenge facing older people to live unique, diverse lives and not get caught up in Western society’s tendency to negate the unique qualities of individual seniors. It could be beneficial to expand on the work of Carlsen with regard to creative aging by setting up ethnoperformance workshops for seniors. Dana, Laara, Ahmadnia, Ida and Violet all, to a greater or lesser degree, were challenged by ageism. To the best of their abilities they were facing the challenge of ageism and fighting back. Collectively these five participants had been challenged for most of their lives.

Wray (2003) reiterated how ageism creates a double standard of aging and how in Western society aging is viewed as a deficiency. The participants in my research study all attested to, at times, feeling stigmatized by society’s negative view of aging and experiencing anger, hurt and sadness because of a general disrespect for the elderly. Hurd’s study (1999) discovered that older women attempted to separate themselves from being labeled ‘old’ and the generalizing that is associated with ageist attitudes.

All five participants in my study, who ranged in age from seventy-one to eighty-nine, were quite cognizant that they were members of the older generation and quite proud to call themselves old. Ahmadnia, at seventy-one, the youngest participant often referred to herself as old. Laara, Dana, Ida, Violet and Ahmadnia did not strive to separate themselves from being labeled ‘old,’ however collectively they had great respect for elderhood. They didn’t ‘struggle’ to appear active; they were active to the best of their ability. Even Violet, at eighty-nine, frail, hearing impaired, coping with balance problems and using a walker because of having broken a leg and an arm the year before, got up and out of her apartment building most days. Although none of the participants in my study were concerned about escaping being viewed as old by others, they discussed how they all carried within themselves the spirit of all the generations and experiences they have lived.
All five participants remarked on how they sometimes looked in a mirror and the age of the face they saw did not correspond to the more youthful person they felt inside. They wanted to find ways in which they could make old age meaningful, purposeful and inspiring. I would be curious to discover whether or not there is a tendency for older women to want to escape being seen by others as old as Hurd found, or if older women accept the stage of old age with stoicism, or if being viewed as old is positive for older women as long as others are aware of and acknowledge the many amazing attributes of character, intelligence, creativity and fortitude that many older women possess. This might be a concept worth expanding on with relation to older women, and especially helpful in developing strategies and workshops for counseling purposes, especially because of the non-stop pressure literature tells us older women face striving to remain young.

Adler, McGraw and McKinlay (1998) explored how older women can become proactive in challenging stereotypical views of the medical profession toward the older generation. The participants in my study discussed the fact that they felt the medical profession gave up on the older generation far too easily and didn’t readily provide information and support re: services available to the elderly. The participants in my study also believed, as did the participants in Adler et al’s study, that a positive, communicative relationship between patient and doctor was essential to good health care and that politeness and respect were empowering behaviors.

Baltes and Baltes (1998) zeroed in on what was a challenge to all the participants in my study – ways in which to successfully balance the inevitability of gains and losses as one ages. The women in my study, women over seventy, were all challenged by the diminishment of physical health, strength and energy. This loss was huge in their perception of their quality of life. Something as simple as not having the hand strength to open jars or pull tin foil tabs to open containers was a great source of frustration and worry to the participants.
For the four participants under eighty years of age, emotional intelligence and wisdom (as Baltes and Baltes (1998) point out) were drawn upon more and more to cope with losses and to create new paths of interest. In support of Baltes and Baltes' (1998) study, Violet who was eighty-nine years of age, found it was more difficult to balance gains and losses because she was more prone to feeling despondent and less hopeful and because she was frailer than the other participants. She often lacked the social interaction (that all the participants agreed was essential to their emotional well being as they aged) that could inspire hope and lessen her feelings of aloneness and sadness. Being in a supportive, inclusive group that worked together collaboratively in a creative manner to provide spaces for the potential of empowerment and voice challenged Violet to transform and she rose to that challenge enthusiastically. She became a powerful source of hope and inspiration for the other participants as they witnessed her freeing of herself from her ‘shell.’

Loneliness/Exclusion/Invisibility

Loneliness? Exclusion? Invisibility? One or two or all three of these states were experienced or being experienced by all five participants in my study. Throughout the literature review in my study, loneliness, exclusion and invisibility came up as three things that many older individuals have faced. The Eriksons (1997), Carlsen (1991), Wray (2003), Hurd (1999), Barlow and Williams (1999), Morell (2003), and Ryan et al (2000), all speak to the prevalence of ageism in Western society that propagates the negation and/or denigration of the diverseness and uniqueness of individuals in the older generation and leads to a callous disregard for the thoughts, feelings, contributions, and worthiness of members of the older generation, causing the elderly to be pushed to the edge of society, into its shadows until the old become what Carlsen (1991) referred to as the “invisible generation.” Those of us who are invisible are without voice.

Dana, Laara, Violet, Ida and Ahmadnia all spoke passionately about loneliness being a huge concern among the elderly, especially among those who lived alone. Laara, Violet, Ida and
Ahmadnia had all experienced loneliness themselves and through volunteer work or day-to-day living attested to knowing of many lonely, depressed seniors. Dana, Ahmadnia, Ida, Violet and Laara performed many stories of feeling excluded or invisible. The participants concurred that having grey hair seemed to invite exclusion and invisibility. How many opportunities are the elderly, who grew up and aged in a slower paced environment, given, in a faster and faster paced society that venerates youthfulness over wisdom and quickness over patience, to voice themselves? Are members of the younger generations able or even willing to listen?

Incorporating ethnoperformance to expand on Carlsen’s work re: the invisible generation, could provide powerful, insightful and compelling evidence for younger generations about the value and respect that should be accorded to older people. At the very least, more research needs to be undertaken to find safe ways in which the diverse, unique, passionate and authentic voices of women over seventy can be freed.

Garner (1999), Cummings et al. (2003), Katz and Marshall (2003), Gubrium and Holstein (2003), Scheidt et al. (1999), Pfeiffer (1999), Qualls (2000), Schlossberg (1990) and Florsheim and Herr (1990) all pointed out, to varying degrees, pitfalls that society has placed in the way of viewing aging as a normal and natural journey that the vast majority of people will be taking. Aging is seen as a problem. If you are old, you are deficient. Why does society place so much emphasis on the physical in relation to the elderly? Why does society view the older generation through what Garner (1999) calls a “narrow lens” and finds them lacking?

Incredibly, society has come to view growing old with fear, even with loathing. Growing old is associated with being abnormal. Garner (1999) succinctly summed up what many of the authors in the literature review alluded to when she suggested that Western society has come to fear the process of dying and death itself to such a degree that it isolates and excludes the older generation by either negating their experiences or silencing their voices. By ignoring or undervaluing the stories of older women, society relegates them to the sidelines where they
become more easily invisible. Once older women have been made invisible it is easy for society to forget about them and stave off dealing with the fact of aging and dying; nothing need be done with regard to challenging ageist views and creating positive changes.

The five participants in my study lived their lives valiantly. Each one talked to herself to get up and get going, to push on when things were tough, to learn, to participate and to work to be a productive, helpful and caring member of society. All five participants believed that they had worthwhile contributions to make to society, yet they had experienced society’s tendency to make it more and more difficult to contribute. This was especially true of Violet who at eighty-nine felt she had a lot to contribute through caring for others.

I was intrigued with Garner’s article (1999), particularly with her belief that voice is critical to gerontology and that women lose social value as they age. Ahmadnia, Violet, Ida, Dana and Laara all had felt pressure to remain young. Youthfulness is valued, old age is not. All five women storied their experiences of having their voices muted and of feeling that society undervalued them as they aged. For Violet at eighty-nine this was most evident. Garner’s article presents an opportunity to further explore a number of ideas: the loss of social value that women face as they age, society’s lack of will to look aging and dying in the eyes and come to terms with death, and the empowerment of older women through the process of collaborative exploration. Using performative inquiry activities to explore the above issues could provide some rich, thick data to use to help create vehicles for positive change in the attitudes society brings to older women.

Schlossberg’s article (1990) related beautifully to my study. As the five participants in my study storied, they showed great diversity through multiple voices and experiences, uniqueness of personality and character, and variability in the ways they were aging. However, Schlossberg claims that literature has suggested that the older generation is “a common, definable group.” Having co-collaborated with five women who were over seventy, I would
suggest that older women are or have the potential to be, vital, dynamic, imaginative and unique.
I would further suggest, just as the participants in my study storied, that older women also have certain concerns and dreams in common.

Gergen and Gergen (2003) and Gubrium and Holstein (2003) also suggest that there has not been enough focus on the diversity of experiences among the older generation. All three articles speak to the importance of acknowledging the variety of ways in which older people live being old and how, as Gubrium and Holstein point out, “they derive meaning from the experience of aging.”

While Ida, Laara, Ahmadnia, Dana and Violet all shared many common life experiences including stories of loss, love of learning, caring and being cared for, fear of becoming a burden, being challenged and loneliness, exclusion and invisibility, they were unique as individuals. All five participants, with their lust for learning, questioned their lives and the experience of growing old. They considered themselves much wiser than when they were younger and they were looking inward to discover what it means to grow old. They were looking for hope, meaningfulness, self-awareness, insight and continued possibility. They wanted to be engaged in life. Throughout the workshops, Laara, Dana, Ahmadnia, Ida, and Violet were dynamic individually and as a collaborative group. They revealed the potential for great passion and gusto. At times they exuded energy. They were vital women who performed their stories of needing to have purpose in life in order not to be ‘invisible.’

Efficacy of Workshops

I am aware that my persona includes ‘teacher.’ I am not just a teacher as a profession; I am a teacher in my heart and soul. Therefore, I cannot separate researcher and teacher. Designing the workshops revolves around teaching and creating spaces for learning, for awareness, for understanding, for straddling the edge of chaos...But as a teacher, I wanted students to be responsible for their own
learning, to communicate, to develop self-awareness, understanding, creativity, to collaborate and share in their own learning. **This is my hope for this research study group.**

Friday, March 26, 2004 (Marianna’s journal)

The compatibility of Schlossberg’s study (1990) to mine was that she advocated creating workshops to teach the older population to cope more effectively with the challenges of aging. In keeping with a lot of the literature reviewed, Schlossberg stressed helping (by teaching) the older generation to be agentic. Schlossberg also mentioned the need for reciprocity in the lives of older people. Expanding on Schlossberg’s article (1990), I believe that creating workshops centered on performative inquiry activities and taking them directly to seniors in recreational centers, care facilities, seniors associations, etc. would open up spaces for coming to voice, for communication and understanding and, hopefully, change.

Ethnoperformance is the performing of a culture, in this case the culture of women over seventy, and it encouraged and embraced the performance of individual stories and group stories. For the five participants in my research study ethnoperformative workshops became dynamic avenues for the rendering of their life experiences. Conquergood, 1998, p.26 (cited in Gray, 2003, p. 254) stated that performing ethnography embraced “immediacy, involvement and intimacy. Furthermore, Conquergood, 1991, p.189 (cited in Gray, 2003, p. 254), also stated that performance ethnography created “particular, participatory, dynamic, intimate, precarious, embodied experience” over the “temporal, decontextualized, flattening approach of text-positivism.”

In the research study, Ahmadnia, Laara, Dana, Ida and Violet experienced ‘immediacy’, ‘involvement’ and ‘intimacy’ and as the workshops progressed, these three elements of the process of ethnoperformance were felt at a deeper, more meaningful level. Ethnoperformance, as experienced by the participants in my study, was rich and rounded; it was ‘participatory’ and animated. The participants were privileged with an exciting energy that grew throughout the
workshops. As well, the participants performed spontaneously. Yes, at times, they found themselves in ‘precarious’ situations that were alien to their usual ways of being or doing or talking or creating however, they always challenged themselves to explore these rather unbalancing experiences no matter how unnerved or scared they were feeling. It became more evident as the workshops progressed that Ahmadnia, Laara, Dana, Ida and Violet were completely engaged as performers. Gray (2003, pp. 255-256) commented that “Victor Turner (1974) argued that human beings are first and foremost performers.” Conquergood (1991, p.187), cited in (Gray, 2003, pp. 255-256) called human beings, “culture-inventing, social-performing, self-making, and self-transforming.”

Taking Schlossberg’s ideas even further, I believed that it is imperative to educate the younger generations about aging. Who better than our oldest generation to teach children and youth what it means to grow old? They are the experts. Older individuals could be taught to create and perform workshops that used improvisational strategies to include both youth and age and these workshops could be taken to schools, colleges and universities. It is within this space for the possibility of performing pedagogy that the voices of the older generation will be heard loud and clear and where they will not be excluded.

In their articles on older women and counselling, Pfeiffer, Qualls, Schlossberg, and Florsheim and Herr speak to the need for communication and understanding (interstanding) among the older generation as well as among the younger generations. How can older women communicate and understand on a rich and meaningful level? Gergen (1991, p. 168) stated that:

Performative psychology supports the notion that human communication is embodied and affective, as well as intellectual, and that all our sense modalities operate at once during communication activity.

The performative workshops provided varied opportunities for the exploration of human communication. Certainly, the participants in my study incorporated embodiment, affect and
intellect when they performed their experiences for and with one another and when they communicated their feelings and hopes to the group.

As stated in chapter three, the process of ethnoperformance is never finished, it is open-ended. The work that the five participants explored during the workshops was incomplete; it was always open to a different rendering or a different meaning. What was uncovered during the workshops was that there was no definitive answer or closure to any experience, but there was a deeper understanding of one another. Freeman (2000, p. 367) described this ‘uncovering’ in the following way:

...If our interest is to explore the participants’ understanding of their own experiences, understanding is seen as a linguistic event, an interactive performance, and a never-ending process that does not bring us closer to any particular answer but opens us up further to each other (Schwandt, 1999).

As the workshops evolved, participants and researcher began to connect in a meaningful way and at a deeper level than the superficial. Mutual respect was germinating and it would have been interesting to see how much further it could have developed if there had been more workshops. The participants were beginning to look with different eyes at their stories and question certain aspects of how they previously had understood their experiences. Freeman (2000, p. 367) spoke to this phenomenon when she said that:

...Social research is not about certainty, and it is not always about answers. It is about human contact, expression, understanding, and respect...Understanding is not just about sharing stories, it is about questioning the role these particular stories have in shaping our understanding of our experiences.

The potential for ethnoperformance workshops to be generative in nature was uncovered during the course of the research study process. They were collaborative endeavors; they could not be generated individually. As Freeman (2000, p.367) stated, understanding is an “interactive
performance.” Meaning was co-created. Gergen (1991, p. 168) stated her belief in the power that is generated when people engage together, when people perform their stories together.

...one does not do performative psychology alone. Others must be willing to coengage and affirm the practices. We generate meaning and significance together. How we go on together is something we cannot as individuals predict or control. Meanings emerge from our togetherness.

It became clear very quickly that the ethnoperformative work that occurred during the study had no boundaries. There was no beginning or end to the work. Violet, Ida, Dana, Laara, and Ahmadnia narrated their experiences in the here and now, in the moment. No performance would have been the same. Ultimately, they held the key, the power as to what their story would be and how it might or might not change from one telling to another and how they would create and co-create meaning. Gergen (1991, p. 168) substantiated these findings by stating that:

A performance is always open-ended in itself and subject to the wills and won’ts of participants, observers, and authorities. The boundaries between the roles of researcher, researched, and reviewer are blurred in performative psychology. Where research begins and ends also becomes unclear once the participatory aspect of performative psychology is taken seriously. If research is about generating knowledge, and if the performance of an activity among participants is a generative process, then the performance itself can be considered part of the discovery component of research.

Humor

I never expected so much humor!! There was so much laughter and fun!! The women can laugh at themselves.

Friday, March 26, 2004 (Marianna’s Journal)

Throughout the six ethnoperformance workshops, I was amazed at how much fun we all had and what a gift of humor each of the five participants possessed and brought to the sessions. These women could laugh at themselves and at the situations they found themselves in.
Laughter became a huge part of each workshop. The humor was as diverse and unique as was each of the five participants. The participants remarked often on how good it felt to have a good laugh and on how important it was to come together and have fun. No where in the literature review did I happen upon a study or article that spoke to or even mentioned the phenomenon of humor and fun and its importance to the older generation. Workshops that incorporate the older generation’s gift for humor under some very difficult situations would be a positive experience for younger generation. They might go a long way in helping to break the ice between young and old; they might help young people to see the older generation not as old and therefore frightening, but as old and therefore interesting.

Unique and New

Ethnoperformance workshops tailored to women over seventy years of age appeared to be a new and unique concept in research. Combining a safe, patient environment, collaborative work, performative inquiry and ample time for debriefing and discussion allowed older women a flexible space within which to perform narratives of their life experiences and their culture in powerfully assertive and compellingly meaningful ways. Reiterating Pfeiffer’s (1999) conviction that the older generation is the true expert on aging and ‘a sensitive barometer of what works and what doesn’t,’ and the authors’ belief in the literature review that older people are individually unique, repositories of wisdom, educable, capable of enthusiasm and motivation, and wonderful storytellers, it behooves communities to support our elderly to be at the forefront of educating society to look at the elderly and listen to what they have to say.

Ethnoperformance was an exciting, generative, and fun way in which members of all generations can collaborate together and begin walking in each others shoes. Performative ethnography was a compelling way to look at and begin to understand the meaning behind the stories of the life experiences of the women in my research study. Ethnoperformance workshops
with women over seventy are new and unique in the literature on aging, but they go beyond just being new and unique (trendy) because my research study uncovered a depth that ethnoperformance can reach, a depth that involves not only the life story but the questioning of what that life story means. Along with Gray (2003, p. 265) and Denzin (1997, p. 95), I also “celebrate the new genre of performance texts and agree that they provide ethnographers with the “single most powerful way...to recover yet interrogate the meanings of lived experience.”

Implications of the Study

What are some of the implications of the study, ‘Older Women’s Narration of Their Experience(s) of Creating Voice Presented Through Ethnoperformance for different facets of society? As far as counselling is concerned, the study suggested that collaborative workshopping with older women is an effective and fun way of creating spaces within which they can empower themselves to come to voice. Literature suggested that older women were sorely underrepresented in counselling even though they suffered from loss, loneliness, being excluded, depression and invisibility. The study revealed that all five participants felt relief to know that other women experienced a number of the major concerns that they experienced. Sharing these revelations with each other was extremely reassuring for the participants and allowed them an environment within which they could empathize with and care for one another and have their experiences normalized.

With regard to education and educators, ethnoperformance workshops using participants that are from different generations could easily be created and performed in schools, colleges and universities. If creative aging is to flourish, then younger generations cannot live fearing the aging process. If young people work together with members of the older population, in creative and fun ways, such as ethnoperformance inquiry, spaces of possibility will open up in which they will experience the aging process in a more positive and life affirming manner. As well, they
will have the opportunity walk beside their elders, perhaps even trading shoes with them for a while.

Senior’s programs could only benefit from offering ethnoperformance workshops. If, like the seniors association that embraced my research study, other seniors associations have as their mandate the creation of voice among seniors, they should welcome workshops for their members that focus on empowering older members of society to make sure that they are seen and heard. As well, ethnoperformance workshops are tailored to make sure that they perform what is meaningful to the older generation.

The five members of my research group did not always have positive experiences with the health care system. As well they agreed that the health care system gives up on them too easily, does not always provide them with the kind of information and services that are available to them, can be unkind, uncaring, and impatient, and, at times, provides no hope. Workshops created for health care providers including health care workers in nursing homes, nurses and doctors would create possibilities for sharing experiences. For older people, who tend to find themselves in very vulnerable positions when they are facing the medical profession, an opportunity would be provided for voicing their concerns in an environment of equality. For members of the medical profession, an opportunity would be provided for them to hear the concerns of the aging population, perhaps even to feel their fear, to understand their frustration and their hurt, in an environment where they are not rushed for time.

Recommendations For further Research

What are the implications for further research that my study has uncovered? Four of the research participants in my study were under eighty years of age. Only one participant was over eighty years of age. More research is needed with people who are considered to be in the ‘old’
old range (people eighty-five years and older) because the workshops seemed to be of great value in opening up space possibilities for Violet to begin to create her voice.

Morell (2003) discovered that voice in women in ‘old’ old age needs to be embodied because women over eighty-five years of age must cope with living a life in which there are more losses than gains, a life in which power and vulnerability co-exist. Ethnoperformance workshops created possibilities for embodied work. Baltes and Baltes (1998) pointed out that individuals in the generation eighty years and older has more ‘dysfunctionality and fewer positive emotions.’ It would be worthwhile to explore whether or not ethnoperformance workshops designed for people in the process of ‘old’ old age would bring meaning into their lives and kick start some more positive emotions such as humor, spontaneity, joy and excitement.

Men over seventy were not included in my study. Exploring how older men create voice through ethnoperformance activities is needed in research. Further research could also include a study that included both male and female participants of the older generation. It would be fascinating to discover the differences and similarities of how older men and older women collaborate with one another to create their stories of empowerment and voice.

As mentioned previously, further research including the young and the elderly collaboratively creating, recreating and narrating their stories through performative inquiry is another facet of potential empowerment that needs to be studied. Also, as mentioned previously, further research needs to be undertaken with regard to expanding upon voice creation through ethnoperformance. For example, an ethnoperformance could be created that is scripted and performed for public audiences.

What about different cultures and voice and ethnoperformance, is there a place for ethnoperformative research with older women from different cultures? I wholeheartedly believe so. Ahmadnia was Persian. I believed that she embraced the research study process and that she
taught the rest of us a lot about her experiences and learned a lot from our experiences. Because ethnoperformative research does not rely on having perfect language facility, it provides a powerful environment in which people of all cultures can come together to ‘interstanding’ if they are willing.

Finally, research on older women’s narration of their experiences of creating voice could be undertaken using different methods, for example narrative research, case studies, participatory action research, a phenomenological approach, and so forth. A study focused on older women and/or men using a variety of different mediums such as drama, photography, music, art, video, etc. that they, themselves, perform would be exciting. Something of this scope could also include participants from other generations.

My Conclusions Regarding the Study

Based on the feedback from the five participants in the study, I would include more workshops. The participants felt that we were just beginning to explore the possibilities of what they were capable of doing as a group and individually. Ida believed that we could have worked together for six more months to really coalesce as a group and explore different ways of communicating. Ideally, I felt that twelve workshops would have been more effective in empowering the women as a group and individually than six, because the participants were beginning to take more responsibility for the discussions. They were not looking to the researcher as much for ideas or valuation of whether or not what they thought was ‘okay.’ They were really beginning to feel comfortable with the concept that there was no right or wrong way of doing and activity. This contributed to their sense of freedom to explore and to their growing animation. The researcher was becoming more of a co-participant and less of a manager. Essentially, I felt that we were just beginning to risk enough to freely explore the ‘borderlands.’
With twelve workshops instead of six, the participants and researcher would have been able to do more guided role play like the guided fairy tale. The guided fairy tale was very illuminating work and, while it was hard work, the participants had a lot of fun and explored meaningful issues in totally new ways. It allowed the participants to work as an entire group empowering themselves and one another for an extended period of time. In hindsight, I would have liked to introduce guided role play earlier on in the study, perhaps during the fourth workshop.

With regard to journal writing, I feel that it should have been an optional activity for those participants that loved writing and wanted to do some at home. Ahmadnia questioned the value of journal writing during the actual workshops and she had a good point. Perhaps the study would have been better served if the participants could have each had their own recorders and recorded their personal reflections. This would have been far easier for Violet, Dana and Ahmadnia who either had trouble putting their thoughts on paper or, felt inhibited because English was their second language. Perhaps journal writing or reflecting was not even necessary to the study because so much reflection was carried out during the ethnoperformance process.

Two of my committee members had some concerns regarding videotaping the process. They were concerned that by being videotaped the participants would feel inhibited and unable to be natural. I must confess that this concerned me as well. I found myself in a dilemma. If the participants could not become comfortable and feel safe during the research process, then the results would not be thick and rich and that would defeat the purpose of the study. A major part of the group process which is entwined within the entire process is the creation of a safe space. However, how was I to analyze the results with any degree of depth if I was not able to have a living record of the work of the participants that I could return to again and again? I needed to both see and hear the participants. If I was only observing and writing during the workshops, I would be a complete outsider during the research process.
So I did some self-talk and gathered together my belief in my experience of working in theater and my experience with being with older women and took a deep breath. Added to that was my faith in the young woman whom I had asked to video the workshops. I knew that she was capable, unobtrusive and had a lot of experience being with older people. All the workshops were videoed. During workshop six the participants, themselves, storied how at ease they had felt being videoed. Ida mentioned how after the beginning of the first workshop, she forgot that she was even being videoed. After the workshops were finished, the participants met at the researcher’s home and watched pertinent clips from the videoed sessions. It meant a lot to the participants to see themselves in action.

How did my role as researcher and co-collaborator impact on the research study? As both teacher and student, I was aware of the power that I had to impact the results of this study.

...I am aware that I need to watch myself for influencing the opinions of my participants. Because this study includes my participation, I need to understand that my ideas, opinions, feelings, beliefs, etc. will be expressed and that’s okay, as long as I am aware when I do this. I have a tendency to interject, to complete people’s sentences/ideas. I need to rein in this tendency. I am aware that I worry that some participants might say things that they think I want to hear to please me. However, so far, this has not happened. The participants appear strong in their beliefs, experiences and convictions.

Friday, March 26, 2004 (Marianna’s journal)

In order to always be aware of the potential for influencing the participants, I kept a journal of my reflections, my concerns and my goals. I consistently went back to the participants, as a group, throughout the research process to ask them for their feedback on whether or not the results that were showing up were the stories they were performing. After the final workshop, I met with each participant, individually, to ensure that they agreed with the results one-on-one.
All five participants agreed with the data and analysis of the data with regard to their individual stories and with regard to the six common group stories or themes.

I also met with one of my peer experts, the coordinator of the senior’s association where the workshops took place. Since her expertise is with seniors, we met and informally discussed the six common stories or themes that were uncovered during the process of the research study. It was a profound discussion. In general, the coordinator of the senior’s association agreed that the six themes – loss of physical health (strength and energy), love of learning, caring and being cared about, fear of being a burden, experiencing a life filled with challenges and loneliness, exclusion and invisibility – were experienced by many seniors. With regard to loss of physical health, including diminishing strength and energy, the coordinator agreed wholeheartedly that this was a common experience among seniors. She agreed that these losses of physical capabilities were confirmed by the literature. The coordinator further commented that in her experience, not only were older women frustrated by these physical losses but that they also were fearful that these losses were harbingers of worse to come. She felt that too many seniors saw these losses as failures on their part.

The coordinator of the senior’s association agreed that older women do have a desire for and a love of learning. She pointed out that society might not be as aware of this as it should be because many seniors do not ‘blow their own horns.’ Many older people will certainly point out the wonderful qualities in other people, but are unwilling or unable to mention their own accomplishments. It’s almost as if to mention the positive results of your search for meaning and love of learning is to be seen as a braggart.

With regard to the stories of caring for others (being needed) and being cared about by others, the coordinator of the senior’s association added thoughtful insight. She agreed that many older women appeared to have a desire to care for others and be needed, but in her experience she felt that for some women it was a question of caring about others, helping others,
even if they didn’t want to. Then the question came up, ‘Do some older women care about others because it’s habit, they’ve been socialized too, or is it because they don’t want to appear bad in the eyes of society? Specifically with regard to family, do some older women feel that if they care for their children and grandchildren that they will be repaid in kind when they need help themselves?

The story of fear of becoming a burden among older women was very familiar to the coordinator of the senior’s association. She agreed that seniors were very concerned with the ever looming shadow of diminishing independence.

The story of being challenged and facing those challenges throughout life was one that the coordinator had mixed feelings about. While she agreed that the majority of seniors have been challenged throughout their lives and continue to be challenged as the older generation, she felt that many of them wished that there weren’t so many challenges or that they didn’t have the strength, physically or emotionally, to face any more challenges. However, they also felt compelled to respond to the challenges. Furthermore, the coordinator felt that many seniors have a ‘nagging feeling’ that they have not successfully faced and dealt with some of their challenges. In her experience, older women tend to see and dwell on their failures rather than their successes.

The stories of loneliness, exclusion and invisibility among women over seventy were known to the coordinator of the senior’s association. She pointed out that in her experience it is not only women without partners that experience loneliness, for instance, she mentioned that sometimes women who are in relationships with partners who have different interests become lonely. The coordinator also stated that women over seventy tend not to discuss their feelings of loneliness, exclusion and/or invisibility with each other because they feel ashamed or embarrassed or that they have failed. With regard to all six stories common to the five participants in the research study, the coordinator of the senior’s association felt that older women need to have their life narratives normalized. They need to reach a deeper level of
communication with one another wherein which they can safely share (perform) their life experiences and question together the richer meaning.

I provided numerous varied activities and opportunities for the participants to engage in storytelling. I also encouraged storytelling and performance through a variety of ways: verbal including speaking, noise making, singing and physical including mime, movement in regular, slow and fast motion, and statues (sculpting). I hoped that this would ensure that participants would be able to narrate their experiences in as many ways as possible. As the workshops progressed, the participants began to take power into their own hands and share more equally in how the workshops evolved.

The process of ethnoperformance opened up new possibilities for the five participants in my study. It brought them together in a safe place in which they could perform their stories in ways in which they never had before. The process of ethnoperformance ensures that someone is listening. It is a patient process that doesn't mind waiting until a story is ready to be told. It is a flexible process and thus, is inclusive of all the participants including those who may be physically frail and/or those whose memories may be waning. Ethnoperformance challenges the participants to be courageous and to try different things. In the experiencing of ethnoperformance, fears are normalized. Learning takes place within the spaces the ethnoperformance creates. My ethnoperformative research study revealed five participants plus a researcher-participant that were drawn in by the process of performative inquiry. We were engaged by the activities and the reflection and questioning involved in performing those activities. We were involved. We were challenged. The study uncovered, just as Denzin (1997) concluded, that performance ethnography is messy; life experience is messy. During the process of performing their life stories, the participants were encouraged to agency. Performing ethnography equals voice.
Questions

Would it be difficult to engage a larger group of older women to perform their stories of creating voice through the process of ethnoperformance? Violet, Ida, Dana, Laara and Ahmadnia were ‘thirsty for learning.’ Even so, Violet almost didn’t join the study because she felt that she had nothing to offer and would be more of a nuisance than a help. Would it be difficult to gather together older women who view themselves as ‘finished’ or ‘useless’ or ‘stupid’ to engage in the exploration of creating voice through performative inquiry activities? Would it be hard to motivate older women who no longer wish to push or motivate themselves (to challenge themselves) to perform their life narratives? Would a large number of older women feel disloyal to their partners or other family members if they were asked to perform, in the here and now, what they were experiencing? Would senior’s homes and care facilities welcome ethnoperformance work shops or would staff fear that the performance of potential negative experiences might shed a dark shadow over them?

Meaning

The respected psychiatrist, Viktor E. Frankl, believed that human beings were primarily motivated by their search for meaning. What became clear to me throughout the research process, was how important, even necessary, it was to each participant that she live a meaningful, purposeful life. Experiencing a meaningful life imbued each participant with a sense of purpose, a reason to be alive. I questioned whether older people are seen by society as searchers for meaning. I wondered if society comprehended how essential it was to the emotional and physical well-being of older women, to the overall quality of their lives, that they were given the respect to lead meaningful lives. I know that Ahmadnia, Laara, Dana, Ida and
Violet were seekers of meaning because they performed over and over again narratives of how essential it was to their emotional well-being that they lead meaningful and purposeful lives.

Frankl (1985. pp. 175-176) spoke to the power and the dignity contained within old people. He also decried the foolishness, perhaps even cruelty of a society that worships youth for its perceived usefulness, rather than respect age for its innate dignity. He questioned the irony in how society places value on its members.

...there is no reason to pity old people. Instead, young people should envy them. It is true that the old have no opportunities, no possibilities in the future. But they have more than that. Instead of possibilities in the future, they have realities in the past - the potentialities they have actualized, the meanings they have fulfilled, the values they have realized – and nothing and nobody can ever remove these assets from the past.

...today’s society is characterized by achievement orientation, and consequently it adores people who are successful and happy and, in particular, it adores the young. It virtually ignores the value of all those who are otherwise, and in so doing blurs the decisive difference between being valuable in the sense of dignity and being valuable in the sense of usefulness...

The Researcher’s Journey

I was very excited about how this first workshop was going to unfold. Excited because I know in my heart that the ‘edge of chaos’ space is always a possibility. Excited because I love the challenge of something new. Excited because this study is truly a labor of love for me. Excited because the ‘narrations’ or ‘stories’ that came to light during the interviews were powerful and
inspirational for me. Excited because I believed that if things came together during the workshops, the possibility of the group, individually, and as a group, to share, collaborate, come to self-awareness and understanding was within reach...

As well, I was also apprehensive about the workshop #1 because nothing has a 100% guarantee. First of all, what would happen if no one (none of the participants) showed up for the workshop? I would feel let down and somehow, responsible for not instilling faith in the participants. What if the group didn’t come together? What if people didn’t feel enthusiasm for the study and the group process? What if we didn’t connect?

Friday, March 26, 2004 (Marianna’s Journal)

Throughout my life I have breathed the stories of older women. Standing closer and closer to the precipice of becoming the older generation, I have become aware that of the six common stories performed by Violet, Ida, Dana, Laara and Ahmadnia four are a large part of my life experience (love of learning, caring for and being cared about, fear of being a burden and of asking for help, and taking on challenges), and while the other two (loss of physical health, strength and energy and loneliness, exclusion and invisibility) have had some impact on my life already it is not to the extent of the first four, yet. I have no illusions about my ability to hold at bay time’s assault on my physical body. Already I have less strength and energy than I had five years ago. I can accept that. To me the aging of the body is natural and should hopefully correspond to a deepening of wisdom and meaning. What I will not accept is that loneliness, exclusion and invisibility have to be a normal, natural part of growing old. To segregate our older generation, to isolate them from younger generations, is highly unnatural to me.

Friday, April 30, 2004 (Marianna’s journal)

I am learning the hardest of lessons for me – to let go, to release, to trust others to move forward without me pulling and pushing them.

Like Violet, Ida, Dana, Laara and Ahmadnia, I find it so much easier to fight on someone else’s behalf rather than on my own. Until now, I had never been able to reconcile my ease for standing up for others with my difficulty with standing up for myself. I have given this a lot of
thought since the workshops. I cannot speak for Violet, Ida, Dana and Ahmadnia, but for myself, standing up for someone else gives me voice. Perhaps, when I act on behalf of someone else, I am also acting on behalf of myself. Being a part of this research group, being privy to the participants’ life narratives has strengthened my courage considerably. I have been witness to five extremely courageous women. They made me want to be better. They made me want to try harder. They made me want to play more. They made me want to laugh more.

Curiously, this enthusiastic group of five women over seventy-five, reminds me of grade twos, whose enthusiasm, engagement, spontaneity, and willingness to ‘risk’ without much embarrassment, is infectious and rare. Courageous! Brave! Takes on challenges! Risk! Laughter! Fun! They make me want to be better. They make me want to learn more. Violet, Ida, Dana, Laara and Ahmadnia are real flesh-and-blood women with real concerns and real dreams.

Friday, March 26, 2004 (Marianna’s journal)

Visualization

In the fall of 2003, while attending Dr. Lynn Fels course on performative inquiry, I experienced visualization in a most profound way. For me it was one of those rare but life-affirming experiences that uplifted me and illuminated my perception of older women, women of my mother’s generation. Dr. Fels asked us to reflect on our experiences of the visualization. My story dreamed my research study. Violet, Ida, Dana, Laara and Ahmadnia are the fabrics of my story.
A vibrantly dressed clothesline,
Attired in rich fabrics, resplendent with color.

Gorgeous shawls with long – fingered fringes that move ever so gracefully.

Ahh.......... 


Hmm.......... 


The fabrics whisper to me and I am compelled to move toward them.

Ahh.......... 

Close, what from a distance appeared pristine, is Worn.
     Faded. Torn. Tattered.

Life Experience. My heart beats women of my mother’s generation.

Carefully. Reverently. I gather beside me the fabrics.
I see their years. I feel their resilience. I breathe their stories.

Together we will wear each other as we live our quest of possibility...
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Appendix A
List of Counsellors

1. Dr. Marla Arvay, Associate Professor, Licensed counsellor
   Address: Counselling Psychology Building, 2125 Main Mall, University of British Columbia, V6T 1Z4
   Phone: (604) 822-4625

2. Dr. Marvin Westwood, Professor, Licensed counsellor
   Address: Counselling Psychology building, 2125 Main Mall, University of British Columbia, V6T 1Z4
   Phone: (604) 822-6457

3. Patrice Keats, PhD. Candidate, Licensed counsellor
   Address: University counseling Center, U.B.C., Brock Hall
   Phone: (604) 822-9260
Consent:
I have read the above information, and have had an opportunity to ask questions. I fully understand the purpose of the study and what my participation will involve.

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

I willingly consent to participate in the study and acknowledge receipt of a copy of the consent form. My signature indicates that I consent to participate in this study.

__________________________  __________________________
Signature of participant      Date

__________________________  __________________________
Signature of witness          Date
Appendix D
Definitions

ETHNOPERFORMANCE/PERFORMANCE ETHNOGRAPHY
. Performed research.
. Offers embodied action, drama, narration, multiple voices, and multiple perspectives.
. Situate the ‘lived experience’ of the participants in the present – in the here and now.
. Seeks to make the experience(s) of a culture visible to society.
. A collaborative and consensual process.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM
. Knowledge is constructed between people.
. According to Burr (1995), social constructionism “takes a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge,” has “historical and cultural specificity,” believes “knowledge is sustained by social processes,” and “knowledge and social action go together.”

POSTMODERNISM
. There is no one overriding ‘truth.’ There are many truths.
. Questions and rejects the basic assumptions of modernism.
. There are many different kinds of knowledge.

QUALITATIVE INQUIRY
. Seeks to understand how the world is constructed (seeks understanding and meaning).
. A rigorous inquiry.
. Provides thick, rich data.
. Uses a variety of methods.
. Situates itself in the participant’s naturalistic setting.

PERFORMATIVE INQUIRY
. Regenerates a thick data collection through the collaborative exploration of participant and researcher reflections using dramatic activities such as visualization, sculpting, tableaux scenes, improvisation, role play and so forth.
. ‘doing, knowing, talking, creating.’
Appendix E
Workshop Outlines

Workshop # 1

Friday, March 26, 2004

Participants: Violet, Laara, Ida, Dana and Ahmadnia

Journal Writing

Find a comfortable space in this room or in another room and either writing or drawing, journal what is going on for you at this moment or during the past little while. Also feel free to journal at home.

Introduction (pass around a ‘talking stone’)

Each person will say her name, tell or show how she is feeling at this moment and tell or show one thing that she loves to do.

Performative Inquiry

A: Chairs. The researcher positions two chairs in different ways. The researcher also participates in this activity. The participants are asked to look at them, to observe them and to reflect on how they view the chairs. What comes to mind? Are they the same? Different? Do they have human traits? Personality? What feelings are evoked? The researcher asks the participants to write down on note cards what feelings, images, moods, ideas and themes arise for them regarding the chairs. Then the researcher and participants share what they have written on the note cards. Discussion.

B: Individual Tableaux: Find a space anywhere in the room and become a frozen sculpture/statue that depicts one of the feelings, images, moods or ideas that you wrote down. Now, add a movement. Now, add a sound.
C: *Group Tableaux (using movement and sound):* One-by-one, everyone joins in. One person begins the group tableaux by finding a space and performing their movement and sound sculpture. Then another person joins in and does her movement and sound sculpture with the first person, and so on until every participant has joined in.

D: *Discussion of the Performative Inquiry Process:*

**Themes:** *(Discussion)*

Potential themes that the researcher has isolated from the conversational interviews are brought to the attention of the participants and discussed. The researcher puts up posters upon which have been written the list of themes. The researcher will do member checks to explore whether or not these themes are meaningful to the participants as a group, or if they only have importance to certain individual participants.

**Tea Break**

*E: Chorale:* Participants and researcher divide into two groups of three and memorize or read the words from the list that they reflected upon for the chairs. Each group, contrapuntally, creates a chorale work that interweaves the words they wrote down or that have come up for them now. Say, yell, whisper, sing, etc. each word in the way that it is evoked for you (loud, soft, strong, weak, sad, funny, etc.). Then add a movement for each word that the word evokes. Practice. Each small group performs their chorale for each other.

*F: Discussion of the chorale process:*

**Group Rules**

As a group, the participants and the researcher discuss and create group rules that will assist in building and maintaining a group environment that is safe.
Debriefing/Discussion

The participants will have the opportunity to discuss what happened for them in this workshop, what they felt, what they were aware of, what they liked or disliked and what they learned about themselves or others.

Workshop # 2

Friday, April 2, 2004

Participants: Violet, Ida, Laara and Ahmadnia

Journal Writing

Write for approximately ten minutes about last week's workshop, what's going on for you now, what went on for you during the week or about what matters to you.

Check-In Discussion (pass around talking stone)

How/what are you feeling right now?

Relaxation

In order to prepare for the next activity it is important to make sure that you are relaxed. Find a comfortable space in the room. Sit or lie down. Legs out. Hands by your sides. Breathe in through your nose. Breathe out through your mouth or nose. Slowly inhale in. Slowly exhale out. Close your eyes. Continue doing this until you find a slow, relaxed rhythm.

Visualization (‘the gift’)

It is helpful to relax both body and mind in order to visualize, in your own imagination, what I will be storying. To visualize means to have a picture in one’s mind, to view with the mind’s eye, to have an inspiration of or simply, to see – to just see. You will find a pace and position in which you can stay relaxed for approximately twenty minutes. You may sit or lie
down. Experience relaxing your legs, feet, arms, hands, head, eyes and mouth. You will keep your eyes closed for the entire visualization. You won’t talk aloud for the entire visualization.

I will talk you through a barebones/skeletal scene which you, in your mind will picture and flesh out by adding details, feelings, thoughts and questions. Just follow along in your mind as I sketch a scene and you, in a manner of speaking, fill in the fine details, meaning and color. Everyone will fill in their story differently. For some, visualization takes a lot of practice, for others it comes naturally. You may find that for days, weeks, even years, thoughts and feelings may arise from this work. Don’t worry if you don’t seem to be visualizing very much. This may just be the beginning for you.

**Let’s begin**...Find a comfortable place and make yourself comfortable. Relax. Close your eyes. Breathe in slowly through your nose and exhale slowly through your mouth. Clear your mind. Continue breathing deeply...

You are standing, looking down upon a sandy beach and the ocean. Take a good look. What do you see? What are the colors? Find a way to get to the beach and go there. What is the journey to the beach like?

When you arrive at the beach, take your shoes off. What does it feel like to be barefoot on the sand? Do what you feel like doing in the sand. How does that feel?

Take a deep breath. Inhale the fragrance of where you are. What smells are there? Now listen carefully. What do you hear?

Make your way over to the water. Test the water with your foot. What does it feel like? Begin to walk along the shoreline. Notice the weather. What is it like? Keep walking.

You notice something beside a log a little further up the beach. Go over to the log. Whatever you have noticed is wrapped up and has your name on the wrapping. You realize that this is something for you, a gift for you. How do you feel? Look at the wrapped gift. Touch it. Do not unwrap it yet. Whatever the size of your gift, find a way to take it to a place where you
would like to unwrap it. Take the gift to that place. Unwrap it. Look at it. Hold it if you can.

Notice what is important about it. How do you feel? What is the significance of your gift? Take a moment to be with your gift.

Breathe.

Debriefing/Discussion of the Visualization

Individually, each participant will narrate the story of their visualization to the group. Then we will discuss the visualization as a group.

Tea Break

Group Rules Revisited

The group will have the opportunity to discuss the previous group rules and decide whether or not they want to add any others.

Themes/Discussion

Themes that were storied during workshop one will be discussed with the participants to explore whether or not as a group they agree with them.

Writing

In your journals, write or draw what was significant for you with regard to your visualization. When you are finished, the workshop is over.

Workshop # 3

Friday, April 16, 2004

Participants: Ida and Ahmadnia

Journal Writing

What are you experiencing now or have you been experiencing that is significant to you?
Check-In Discussion (pass around talking stone)

How/what are you feeling right now? At this time in your life, what is your next goal or the next thing that you hope to accomplish in your life?

Performative Inquiry
A: Role play: ‘The Party’ You are not yourself; you are in role. Together, we are going to create and perform a role play. There is no right or wrong way to do this activity. It is a group collaborative effort. We will all be in role and not ourselves. Each of us will decide who we are and live out that person/character in role.

Together let’s set the scene. Where are we for this party? Who are we? Why are we at the party? Let’s create the room. We are ready to begin role playing.

B: Debrief the Role Play: What was your experience? What happened for you? What were the ‘aha’ moments for you?

Tea Break

Performative Inquiry Continued
C: The Painting: (a landscape) Look at the painting and reflect on what it evokes for you. What words come to mind as you look at it? Feelings? Mood? Thoughts? Images? Write your reflections on paper. Then find a space in the room and, one-at-a-time, read aloud or say aloud what reflections came to you. With a partner, interweaving both sets of reflections, create a piece of performative writing. Then, together, perform your piece. Use movement as well as words to express your performative piece.

Debriefing/Discussion
Workshop # 4

Friday, April 23, 2004

Participants: Violet, Ida, Dana, Laara and Ahmadnia

Journal Writing

What do you like, love, respect, and/or treasure about yourself? What would you like to work on, perhaps, change about yourself? What bothers you about yourself? What don’t you like about yourself?

Check-In/Discussion (pass around talking stone)

How/what are you feeling right now?

Performance

Ahmadnia and Ida will perform their ethnoperformance from last week for the rest of the group.

Discussion (reactions, comments, feelings from the group audience and the performers)

Performative Inquiry (‘I Am’ Narrative)

A: Answer the following questions about yourself and write the answers down:

Name?

Age?

Something(s) you love about yourself?

Something(s) you would like to change about yourself?

Fears?

Hopes?

Complete the following statements:

I feel..................


Tea Break

Performative Inquiry Continued

B: Working with the information that you reflected upon before the break, create a performative work. Sculpt it into a storied performance that speaks for you. Practice the performance by embodying it with movement, sound and vocals. Perform it for the group.

C: Debriefing/Discussion of the performative story.

Discussion

Workshop # 5

Friday, April 30, 2004

Participants: Violet, Ida, Dana, Laara and Ahmadnia

Check-In Discussion

Performative Inquiry

A: Spontaneous Sculptures (individually in the whole group) Through a series of frozen sculptures or tableaux (using your body) show how it feels to be you, here today. I will call out FREEZE. RELAX. FREEZE. RELAX. and so forth.

B: Movement in Slow Motion: Individually working within the whole group, discover and explore the room in slow motion.

C: Movement in Speeded up Motion: Discover and explore the room in speeded up motion.
D: Poem by Fran Portley

Endurance

- Fran Portley

We women who have lived
trough many winters
are sisters to mountain flowers
found in rocky crevices
high in the Alps.
Hardened by wind and snow
We endure cold
absorb brief sun
reach long roots
to meager sustenance
lift bright blossoms to empty air.

from “When I Am An Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple”

Put the poster with the poem on it so that the group can see it. The researcher reads the poem aloud. One-by-one the participants are invited to read the poem aloud. Ask the participants to reflect on how the poem affects them.

Invite each participant to reflect on and complete the following statement:

This poem makes me feel...........................because........................................

Invite each participant to perform their reflections for the group.

E: Debrief/Discuss the participants’ reflections

Tea Break
Performative Inquiry Continued

F: Photo Reflection: Two black and white photographs of the same woman, at thirty-one and at eighty, in the same frame are placed on the table. The participants are asked to look at the photos and jot down images, thoughts, feelings, insights, etc. that the photos evoke for them.

Then, with a partner, the participants are asked to weave together their reflections into a story or stories that they will perform for the rest of the group. The participants are invited to embody their stories in whatever way they want. Be creative. Be imaginative. Be unique.

The partners perform their stories of the photos for the group.

G: Debriefing/Discussion of the Photo Experience

Discussion (include member checks on more participant themes that have arisen)

Workshop # 6

Friday, May 7, 2004

Check-In/ Discussion

Individually, perform through singing, the story of how you are feeling.

Debrief

As a group, reflect to each other on what the experience of singing how you were feeling was like.

Performative Inquiry

A: Guided Fairy Tale Role Play Improvisation

Narrator: Marianna

Characters: (all over seventy years of age) Town’s oldest citizen, town’s queen, town’s teacher, town’s musician, and town’s gardener. Each participant will be asked to volunteer to be one of
the above characters. Each character will have a special gift or ability. Each character will have a spell that they will invoke as the tale progresses.

**Quest:** To discover and bring back to the other townspeople the stories of being over seventy before they are lost to future generations.

**Town’s Name:** As a group, the participants will create the name of their town.

**What is Your Town Like?:** Each participant will be asked to describe their town.

**What is the Title of this Fairy Tale?:** As a group, the participants will create the title of their town.

**REMEMBER:** This is spontaneous work; there is no right way of doing it and no wrong way of doing it!!!

**Narrator:** Says the title of the tale. Throughout the role play, the narrator performs with the ‘townspeople.’

*Once upon a time in a not so faraway land, lived five townspeople who were all over seventy years of age. Their town was in danger of ‘being no more’ because the stories of being over seventy were no longer being told. Let’s meet the five townspeople now.* (Each character introduces herself and talks about her special gift or ability). *Together these characters will discover and bring back their stories of being over seventy before they are lost to future generations. Let us begin the journey.*

There are five challenges that the narrator will introduce throughout the role play. The participants and the narrator will become the embodiment of each challenge and use movement and vocals as part of that embodiment. The five challenges are: *the fire breathing dragon, the impassible river, the mountain that cannot be climbed, the tree that sends out zaps of electricity, and the dying town.* Every time a challenge is introduced by the narrator, one of the characters is invited to approach the ‘challenge’ and tell it what they think is wonderful about being over seventy and what is difficult about being over seventy. Through movement and vocals, that
character invokes the spell that she was given. The challenge is thus faced and conquered and the group can continue on with their journey.

After the final challenge has been conquered, each townspeople is invited to tell each other and the ‘imaginary’ townspeople what they can do to make a positive difference in the lives of our elders.

*The five town’s elders and the narrator then, one-by-one, create a group statue in the center of the town in which each character (part of the statue) is connected to another. They freeze the statue.*

*Narrator: The town blossomed and is still gathering stories and gaining wisdom.*

The End

*Debrief/Discuss the Role Play*

Tea Break

*Member Check Discussion (themes)*

*Performative Inquiry Continued*

*B: Reflect on and perform the analogy or metaphor that speaks for you, that symbolizes who you are and what you are.*

*Discussion (reciprocity)*

Invite the participants to narrate what they have gained from the workshops specifically, and the research process, generally.

*Close (Thanking the participants for their commitment and willingness to risk and for all they have taught me)*
Appendix F
Workshop Photographs

Ahmadnia, Ida, Violet, Dana, Marianna

Laara, Marianna, Violet
Ahmadnia, Marianna, Ida

Dana, Marianna, Violet

Ahmadnia
Dana

Ahmadnia

Marianna, Ahmadnia