ATTITUDES TOWARD ONE’S OWN AGING AMONG SINGLE, PROFESSIONAL, HIGHLY EDUCATED BABY BOOM WOMEN:

“I DON’T KNOW WHO I AM, BUT I AM NOT A CRAZY OLD MAID!”

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ABSTRACT

ATTITUDES TOWARD ONE’S AGING AMONG SINGLE, PROFESSIONAL, HIGHLY EDUCATED BABY BOOM WOMEN:

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Age is a value-laden cultural construct as it conveys social attitudes toward aging. This qualitative research, using a grounded theory approach and critical feminist gerontology as a theoretical framework, makes visible the experience of growing older and the re-negotiation of self-identity among the ten single, professional, highly educated women ages 47-59 who resided in the Pacific Northwest and lets their voices be heard. In this study ten in-depth interviews and one focus group provided narrative data that captured women’s experiences of aging and uncovered common themes. The explored phenomenon of aging is experienced in the various socio-cultural contexts and conditions by the participants who belonged to the Baby Boom generation with its unique history and diversity. Women’s aging is explained in grounded theory that questions problematic stereotyping of older single women and indicates the process of the emerging of a new identity of the Baby Boom women and the need for a cultural shift in attitudes toward aging. The participants of the study challenged socially constructed pathology of singlehood and the “old maid” stereotype by implementing specific strategies designed to
make a transition to “graceful aging” in ways which preserve women’s independence, freedom, choice, and positive self-image. More research is needed to explore attitudes toward one’s aging among older minority women, women with low socio-economic background, and women with disabilities. The electronic version of this document is found at OhioLink ETD Center, www.ohiolink.edu/etd.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Anna Vishnevskaya, whose love, strength, humor, and kindness forever live in my heart.
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I would like to extend my gratitude to all the women participants who shared their hopes, worries, and strengths with me and were amazingly brave and insightful when we looked together in the future of aging.

I thank my dear husband, Tom Davis, who encouraged me to pursue a Doctorate and walked by my side during this difficult and exciting journey offering his love, unwavering support, time, and his wonderful editing skills which were badly needed. I want to acknowledge my parents, Bella and Rackmil Vishnevskie, for being my cheerleaders and loving supporters during all my life and especially in a process of completing this research.

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Background

Introduction

Our society is aging and older women comprise one of the most rapidly growing groups in terms of the percentage of the U.S. population. The cohort of Baby Boom women born after the World War II in the years roughly 1946-1964, is now 45-60 years old, and these women are considered older women by a society that labels women old before they do men who are of similar age. These Baby Boom women will be the first female cohort whose labor force participation will span most of their adult life. This cohort is the best educated female group in American history, as Baby Boom women strongly invested in higher education, which was previously regarded as an opportunity largely available for males (Dailey, 1998).

Baby Boom women have been and are making new choices about childbearing and marriage. Some choose not to marry and high divorce rates have forced others into singlehood. A significant number of single professional women have grown accustomed to independence, financial security and occupational gratification (Price, 2003). It is unlikely that single, Baby Boom women will replicate their mothers’ experience of aging, nor will their aging experiences be similar to those of men.

Critical gerontology, feminism, and life development theory challenge assumptions and stereotypes related to body image, menopause, sexuality and self-identity of older women (Bernad & Davies, 2000; Foerster, 2001; Hurd, 1999; Nelson, 2005; Sheehy, 1995). A substantial body of work in these three theoretical frameworks addresses ageism and sexism that persist in the collective psyche via stereotypes of decline, deteriorating body image, and loss related to aging. However, older women in the
Baby Boom cohort themselves assert that aging does not inevitably mean sickness, frailness, loneliness, and severe cognitive impairment (Foerster, 2001). They resist their assignment by society to a devalued status and construct new expectations and identity for older adulthood (Dychtwald, 1999).

**Problem Statement**

Although a number of studies explored experiences of aging among women of color, women in poverty, women with disabilities and widows (Chambers, 2000; O’Rurke, 2004; Slevin, 2005; Stevens, 2001), there is very little work indeed that specifically examines one’s attitudes toward aging among midlife, single women, especially those who closely identify themselves with career and education. The findings of two qualitative studies that explored women and midlife identity (Price, 2003; Tretheway, 2001) revealed that for women invested in their work roles and lacking traditional family roles, transitioning into older adulthood may trigger a crucial sense of absence of the older identity. Tretheway and Price both argued that for single women, self-identity is greatly dependent on an individual’s perception of the roles in which she participates. Not surprisingly, traditional life development theory models life stages on marriage and child rearing (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003), and even the latest ground breaking research on successful aging (Vaillant, 2002) equates well-being with marriage.

Only a small number of studies (e.g., Anderson & Steward, 1992; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Sandfield & Percy, 2003) have specifically examined the way in which women construct their singlehood and in what ways society has marginalized them. The findings of these studies suggest that being single is a troubled, almost pathological identity for women, especially in later life. At the same time there is evidence that single,
highly educated, successful, professional women discover new strengths and opportunities for self-development that aging may bring (Bernard & Davies, 2000). Clearly, there is a need for research that will make visible the experience of growing older and re-negotiating self-identity among single, professional, highly educated women and will let their voices be heard and respected.

**Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative study explores attitudes toward one’s aging among ten single, professional, highly educated women born between 1945 and 1960 using grounded theory to identify the common themes that emerged from individual and group reflections on aging. This study, drawing upon a feminist approach, highlights the phenomenon of growing older for such women in the social context in which it occurs.

**The Research Questions**

Development of a grounded theory was guided by two major research questions:

1. What is the theory that explains an individual’s aging as perceived by single, highly educated, professional, Baby Boom women?

2. What social and cultural influences impact women’s perception of their aging?

Five additional sub questions are related to the aspects of generating a grounded theory (Creswell, 1998):

1. What are the general categories that emerge in a first review of data?

2. What central phenomenon emerges?

3. What contextual and intervening conditions influenced it?

4. What strategies and outcomes resulted from it?

5. What were the consequences of those strategies?
A Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix A) was given to participants at the beginning of interviews to obtain basic demographic data. Two different sets of questions, one for individual interviews and another for focus groups, were used to elicit intimate, textured understanding of beliefs, expectations, and experiences related to aging among the participants of the study.

Delimitations & Limitations

Because this was a small-scale qualitative study, its format did not allow the researcher to fully address cultural differences in women’s experience of aging, as the sample lacked ethnic diversity. For the same reason this study did not focus on the variables related to marital status to compare the experiences of aging among never married, divorced, or widowed women and/or other specific variables and their influence on the experience of aging such as having children or being childless, being heterosexual or homosexual, being disabled or able-bodied. Analysis of these variables would require analyzing a number of larger samples and doing cross-cultural comparison using the appropriate quantitative methods.

It is important to note that the nature of qualitative research allows drawing data that lies in the richness of language of the lived experiences of the participants. Therefore, generalization of the findings of this study is not feasible due to its small sample size and the homogeneity of the sample, however, thematic generalization is possible.
Review of Literature

Cultural Constructions of Age and Aging

Age will only be respected if it fights for itself, maintains its own rights, avoids dependence, and asserts control over its own sphere for as long as life lasts.

Cicero (Cited from Sic Hung Ng, 1998)

As history tells us, human cultures have regarded aging as a positive, natural process of gaining wisdom, accomplishments and privilege, a process that resulted in obtaining a special honored place in the society. In the past, before the industrial revolution, elderly people have played a significant role in decision-making and governance (MacGregor, 2003). They were the keepers of meaning, the teachers, and the custodians of tradition and culture. However, the industrial revolution demanded mobility and adaptation to changes and technology, and many societies moved away from the appreciation of older adults to prizing of the young. After establishing that older adults did not contribute directly to society, society began to perceive old age with negative attitudes and began to count the various financial burdens associated with a large population of older adults. Today, older people in Western, U.S. culture are often seen as second-class citizens and, with ageism on a rise, they experience the negative attitudes toward aging in many subtle ways and on a daily basis (Butler, 1989; Pushkar, Basevitz, Conway, Mason & Chaikelson, 2003; Smith, 2001; Waltz, 2002).

It can be argued that the meaning of age is culturally determined and is socially negotiated or imposed (Ng, 1998). According to Hung Ng, for young Americans the prime of life ends at about 50 years for men and even earlier for women, beyond which there is decline. In line with the cultural construction of age, Marinez (2002) presented his
biocultural model of aging, arguing that growing older is the cognitive and biological accumulation of time, whereas aging is the consequences of our behavior contextualized within a culture’s history. As Martinez pointed out, “A culture defines the biocultural portal as well as interprets the health and the quality of aging” (p. 655). Martinez argued that statements such as “you are too old for that” or “your medical conditions are age-related” are mostly endorsed by cultural convention rather than hard science. The culture carries certain expectations of behaviors for people of various ages, and ageism segregates younger and older people into “us and them” (Nelson, 2005, p. 217).

Robert Butler (1989) originally defined ageism:

Ageism can be seen as a systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender. Old people are categorized as senile, rigid in thought and manner, old-fashioned in morality and skills. Ageism allows the younger generations to see older people as different from themselves; thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings (p.139).

Ageism manifests itself on two levels – institutional and individual - and does so via stereotyping, myths, avoidance of interactions with older people, and discrimination in employment, health care and social services (Bowd, 2003; Waltz, 2002). To some degree, ageism is promoted by popular culture. Typically, the image of an isolated, useless elder, worrying about money and in deteriorating health, is portrayed in films, television shows, and advertising. The majority of Americans believe that it is only natural for older people to suffer from depression and social isolation (Combe & Schmader, 1999). The image of grumpy old people, eating TV dinners and watching mindless game shows, sends a
message to a younger audience: older age is about senility and physical decline. Powell and Longino (2001) asserted that the well-constituted media image of an aging body with its physiological signs of decline serves as an indicator of aging that people use in order to recognize the signs of aging in their own images.

The consumer culture, preoccupied with young and perfect bodies, constructs and reinforces negative language and images of later life (Powell & Longino, 2001). By perceiving the body as a symbol of one’s identity, the consumer culture promotes a concern about physical appearance and then exploits it. The findings of a well executed empirical study (Oberg & Tornstam, 2001) that explored the importance of youthfulness and fitness among 1,250 Swedish individuals aging from 20 to 85 years old, showed that the majority (70-78%) of the respondents would like to feel younger, wish to be younger, and think that other people see them as younger as they are. Thus, Oberg and Tornstam argued, the urge to feel young and the desire to redefine old as youthful may be interpreted as a subtle form of ageism and may reflect gerophobic attitudes that force people to “outdefine themselves from the negative collective identity of old people by describing themselves as still young” (p. 27).

Interestingly, a small scale qualitative study, conducted by Hurd (1999), concurred that women between ages of 50 and 90 seek to distance themselves from the category “old” and the accompanying ageist stereotypes. The findings of this study suggest that older adults find their own experiences to be contrary to the negative images of aging. According to Hurd, the “not old” use activity and group affiliation to elucidate their categorical status and define their identity in terms who they are and what they are not. However, it should be noted that the nine participants of Hurd’s study were Caucasian,
middle-class, single, and physically active women who attended various classes at a senior center. Unfortunately, no qualitative data are available on the attitudes toward the ageist stereotypes associated with oldness among older adults with disabilities, older adults of color, and older adults that reside in institutions.

Extensive research showed that majority of people share negative attitudes toward elders and aging, which are reflected in myths and beliefs. Ory, Hoffman, Hawking, Sanner and Mochenhaupt (2003) summarized the findings of the famous MacArthur Foundation Study on Successful Aging (1998) describing six common myths of aging: to be old is to be sick; older people are not capable of learning new things; older people cannot adopt recommended lifestyle behaviors to increase physical activities; genetic factors determine longevity and quality of life; sexual life is a joke for older people; the elderly do not work for pay and, therefore, are useless for the society. These widely shared beliefs have already been debunked by a number of sound empirical studies (e.g., Pushkar, et al., 2003; Valliant, 2002) that produced solid evidence contradicting these popular views on aging.

What are the sources of ageist views? It is difficult to pinpoint a single root of ageism in popular culture that pre-judges, labels and caricatures older people. According to Ory et al. (2003), ageist views may come from a lack of knowledge about the real processes of aging, lack of close interactions with older people, and a fear of becoming old. Ageist views are based on simplistic generalizations and do not take into account individual differences. In everyday language, ageism conveys the degrading message that older people are second-class citizens because of their expected, inevitable health deterioration and impaired cognitive functioning. Rudkin (2003) explored the
“power of naming” and the significance of language that is used to define the status of oppressed and marginalized groups by socially powerful groups. Naming, according to Rudkin, provides a cognitive structure that enables people to interact with other individuals by regarding them initially as members of social groups. Naming helps to form stereotypes that facilitate prediction of the behaviors of groups of people. Bowd (2003) suggested that the negative stereotyping of aging held by middle-aged and younger people allows the holders of the stereotype to distance themselves from the elderly and justify the dominance of the young in society. Bowd studied the stereotypes of elderly persons found 4,200 adult narrative jokes that determine predominant stereotypes reflecting ageism. Based on the findings of his study, Bowd established eight ageist stereotypes: the impotent male, the unattractive female, the vain/virile male, the disinterested female, the innocence of second childhood, the insatiable female, the forgetful old person, and the infirm old person.

Several empirical studies (e.g., Bowd, 2003; Combe & Shmader, 1999; Valliant, 2002; Waltz, 2002) addressed the harmful consequences of ageist stereotypes for people subjected to such stereotyping. The findings of these studies suggested that older people internalize the negative views of aging and act accordingly with detrimental effects to their self-esteem, confidence, control, independence and abilities. Negative self-perception of one’s own aging may affect older people’s physiological responses, functioning and even longevity. In short, the internalization of negative ageist stereotypes can be viewed as a risk factor or health hazard and a positive attitude toward one’s aging serves as a protective health factor (Combe & Schmader, 1999).
It is not only the negative stereotypes of aging that affect the well-being of older people and the choices they make with regard to the levels of activity, independence and control that they have over their lives. Some positive stereotypes held by society view older people as wise, kind, asexual beings. This pacifying, narrow image of the wise, kind elder robs older people of the opportunity to have new experiences, learn new skills, expand their activities, grow personally, and enjoy their sexuality (Waltz, 2002).

Social stereotypes regard older women as unattractive and sexually inactive. Based on the body image promoted by the media, it is expected that women’s bodies should have the soft, hairless and unwrinkled characteristics of youth and immaturity (Foerster, 2001; Trethewey, 2000; Tunaley, Walsh & Nicolson, 1999; Waltz, 2002). However, when women mature, their bodies are far from the desired pre-adolescent size and shape, and aging for the majority of women results in wrinkles, fat storage, and gray hair. The findings of a number of qualitative studies of women and aging suggest that some women experience aging as a humiliating process of sexual disqualification (Bernard & Davies, 2000; Tunaley, et al., 1999; Waltz, 2002). Despite evidence that sexual interest continues throughout one’s life span, cultural taboos surround sexual activity among older women and their sexual desires may be seen as distasteful. This cultural taboo may be understood by linking sexual activity and reproduction. Based on such connection between sex and reproduction, post-menopausal older women are defined as asexual because their reproduction period is over (Waltz, 2002).

As with many other social phenomenon, stereotypes of aging and attitudes toward aging often change in the overwhelming face of demography. The power of demographic trends is unavoidable and brings profound changes in labor relations, social services, and
retirement. New medical technologies, better health care and the promotion of healthier and safer lifestyles have increased temporal longevity. At the same time, the meaning of life spans that have been chronologically lengthened has not undergone an equivalent psychological lengthening (McGregor, 2003). The cultural meaning of aging is being re-negotiated and re-shaped as American society is experienced an astonishing “age wave”. The American population is growing older as the Baby Boom generation is moving toward retirement. An estimate by the U.S. Census Bureau (2000) predicts that by the year 2030, the number of people over age 65 will double. Society must be ready to accommodate this enormous transformation in its population (Nelson, 2005). Such a dramatic shift in the culture of aging will require policy makers, the media, health professionals, and American society in general to become more sensitive to ageism and age prejudice, and to redefine cultural the construction of aging.

The gender imbalance in aging is accelerating as older women become one of the most rapidly growing categories of the U.S. population. Dailey (1998) pictured a future in which older women comprise the majority of the aging population:

If a baby boom woman reaches age 65, she can expect to live until age 85. For the majority of that time, she will be alone as a widow, a divorcee or as never married. She will likely be widowed at the age of 67 and remain a widow for fifteen years. Fewer than one in ten will remarry (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1991). According to Social Security Administration projections, by 2040, there will be 15 million widows and 4.5 million widowers aged 65 or older (p.39).

As this critical mass of Baby Boom women moves through its life cycle, it will continue to change the cultural constructions of age and aging.
A Female Cohort of Baby Boom Generation

The Baby Boom generation has greatly affected American society due to the enormous size of the cohort. The term “Baby Boomers” refers to a group of approximately 76 million Americans, born between 1946 and 1964 and comprising one third of the total U.S. population (Dailey, 1998). There is no single explanation of the baby boom phenomenon, although many attempts have been made to account for this fertility bulge. Most likely, it was a combination of cultural, social, and economic factors. Baby Boomers enjoyed growing up during peaceful times and under relatively stable, good economic conditions (Coulson, 1994).

Cushman (1995), grounded in a hermeneutic approach to history, drew a colorful portrait of the Baby Boom generation:

The mix of avoidance, indulgence, and idealization, combined to add justification to the baby boomers’ experience of themselves as a generation apart. They thought that few outside their cohort could understand them, and thus nobody could lead them. ... Sacrifice, hard work, tolerating the passage of time, accepting the randomness of events – these features were somewhat foreign. The baby boomers were used to simple answers and easy solutions – things happening quickly, for the right reasons and without great personal sacrifice. They were used to consuming, not producing; gratification, not frustration; immediacy, not long-term planning. Perhaps, it is not surprising that their change in perspective came by way of drugs, spiritual change through radical, guru-forced sudden transformation, and political activity in the form of colorful, dramatic confrontations and mass celebrations (p.232).
The Baby Boomers directly experienced the effects of the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and its end, the feminist movement that sought equality for women, and a resignation of a president of the United States. Dailey (1998) asserted that there are only two generalizations that accurately describe the Baby Boom cohort - its size and its diversity. Diversity in education, occupation, race, gender, ethnicity, geographical region, and in the practice of religion, marriage and divorce reflect the complexity of this cohort. This cohort was shaped by industrialization, urbanization, globalization, and secularization and was united by the idea that they have a special mission in life (Cushman, 1995). Because of their life experiences, the female cohort of Baby Boomers is inherently different than prior cohorts of women in American history, especially in the areas of education and employment. The cohort of Baby Boom women have entered and stayed in the labor force in record numbers and they became the best-educated female cohort in the history of America (Coulson, 1994).

Sheehy (1995) contended that professional Baby Boom women exercised regularly, invested in their health and longevity, and believed that they actually look ten years younger that their birth certificates would attest. By midlife, Sheehy stated, these professional Baby Boom women shifted their values from independence and romance to the yearning for community with friends, a broader sense of place, power, family commitment, and the creation of social change.

The most comprehensive study of the female cohort of Baby Boomers and the demographic, economic, and political implications of their aging and retirement was conducted by Dailey (1998) and deserves special recognition. Dailey studied women born between 1946 and 1964 by examining existing empirical data involving Baby Boom
women. The sources of the data in this extensive quantitative study were census data, unpublished tabulations and statistics from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and several prominent retirement studies.

Dailey’s work raises many urgent questions about the future of women from the Baby Boom generation because Baby Boom women, who came of age during one of the longest periods of sustained economic growth in the U.S. history, will retire during a period of economic uncertainty and transition. Dailey pointed out that 80 percent of all Baby Boom women with five or more years of college are currently in the labor force, altering the composition of the workforce in occupations that men have historically dominated. In addition, Baby Boom women are much more likely to delay marriage or never marry and/or divorce more frequently than their parents or their male counterparts. Being single or divorced, asserted Dailey, continued to positively influence women’s employment. Dailey also pointed out that childless women were more likely to have uninterrupted work histories that resembled the work experience of men.

After analyzing various demographic variables, Dailey suggested that there is no one retirement future for Baby Boom women due to the diversity of this female cohort. However, generalizing the findings of the study, Dailey emphasized:

Baby Boom women are at a financial disadvantage as they approach retirement. They earn less than men, have less access to pension coverage, have more difficulty saving, carry the caregiving burden for children and elderly, and they can expect to outlive their spouses by fifteen years. ... Baby Boom women will shift their caregiving from children to the frail elderly as they move towards old age. This may be the biggest surprise of all for Baby Boom women. The vision of
“freedom from work”, for unstructured free time, for leisure, will materialize only for those with financial means to avoid caregiving (pp.124-125).

The findings of another quantitative study on labor market participation and the earnings of the female cohort of Baby Boomers (Coulson, 1994) also suggested that the female Baby Boomers with higher level of education have enjoyed greater earnings in the labor market and that the female Baby Boomers, who had previously been divorced or never married, earned more than did those who married but had never been divorced.

Both Coulson (1994) and Dailey (1998) proposed that the commonly held assumptions regarding women’s aging and retirement should be strongly challenged and that Baby Boom women need to be informed about the future reality of their old age, so that they can act on their own behalf to plan for their retirement. At the policy level, a national conversation on aging is needed in order to increase the awareness that aging is very much a women’s issue, so that women’s aging needs can be adequately addressed.

Singleness, Midlife Adjustment, and Professional Identity

The marginalization of single women (never married, divorced, and widowed) continues when these women are defined by the compulsory heterosexuality of marriage and long-term partnership. Traditionally, the female life scenario leads to a heterosexual romance followed by marriage, which is viewed as the ultimate success story, at which point, the woman’s story ends (Sandfield & Percy, 2003). This narrative of the female’s fate ignores the possibility that women may definitely choose to remain unmarried and contributes to cultural images of the unmarried woman as desperate and flawed. Reynold and Wetherell (2003) argued that cultural assumptions about femininity necessarily require connection with a man. Such assumptions and prescribed norms force women into
relationships. As a result, women may fail to recognize their identity as separate, free standing and autonomous persons. Eichenbaum and Orbach (1987) argued that women derive their identity through intimate relationships, and therefore, seek a relationship not just for connection, but driven by the need for identity (Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1987 in Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003). Single women, therefore, may be seen as having difficulty in forming and staying in intimate relationships and they may be targeted for therapeutic interventions. Moreover, women who cannot get married are typically seen as having insufficient resources or qualities to attract a husband.

Feminist researchers attempted to define the psychology of singleness based on critical discursive psychology rather than the supposed dysfunction of single women. A number of qualitative studies addressed the issue of the identity of single women (Anderson & Stuart, 1994; Ferguson, 2000; Sandfield & Percy, 2003) and organized their findings into a framework of themes, therefore attempting to give single women a voice. The authors of these studies proposed the politics of self-acceptance, self-transformation, and self-actualization for single women.

Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) conducted a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with 30 single women, aged 30 to 60 years, to determine the identity that single women construct through their discourse. This relatively large sample was comprised of middle class, ethnically and sexually diverse, urban women. Reynolds and Wetherell suggested that the single state was best viewed as socially constructed, as being a social category, a discourse that had a set of complex meanings and practices, and a set of personal narratives and subject positions. They asserted that narratives for single women are a way of managing identity in a shifting, challenging, complex and fragmented
ideological continuum. The findings of the study suggested that women referred to the four main interpretative repertoires in order to make sense of singleness: singleness as personal deficit, singleness as social exclusion, singleness as independence and choice, and singleness as independence and achievement.

Singleness as personal deficit and singleness as social exclusion were strongly denigrated and dismissed by the participants, while singleness as independence and choice and singleness as self-actualization and achievement were strongly idealized and praised. Such strong polarization of the internalized stereotypes of singleness, according to the authors, presented challenges for women when they attempted to define their identity via narratives. Similar findings, obtained by Anderson and Stuart (1994), showed that single women are aware of this challenge and tend to develop a reflexive account when talking about the dilemma of constructing identity in order to deal with the two polarities of single identity.

Surprisingly, the findings of another qualitative study (Sandfield & Percy, 2003) presented unmarried status as a temporary stage, preparatory to marriage, or the consequence of failure to maintain heterosexual relationships. Remaining single in later life was constructed as a threat, and older single women were constructed as lonely and isolated. References to older women were predominately negative and derogatory, and participants’ accounts were characterized by heterosexism and ageism.

The difference in the findings of these two qualitative studies, especially in the attitudes toward older single women, may be explained by analyzing the ages of the participants of both studies. While in the Reynolds and Wetherell’s study, 28 out of 30 participants were women older than 43, in the Sandfield and Percy’s study, 9 out of 12
participants were women between the ages of 23 to 28 years. Younger women in the Sandfield and Percy’s study, discussing older single women, exhibited culturally determined negative attitudes toward aging that especially devalue older women.

However, the majority of older single women do not construct their identity as pathological (Sheehy, 1995). Older women, according to the findings of a qualitative study on the dating preferences of women born between 1946 and 1960 (Levesque & Caron, 2004), when compared to a younger cohort of women between the ages of 20 to 25 years, showed significant difference in attitude toward marriage and long-term commitment. Older women, according to the findings of this study, were not preoccupied with the attainment of status or financial security through marriage. Instead, they were interested in maintaining an independent lifestyle and they were comfortable with their own ability to take care of themselves (Levesque & Caron, 2004).

Ferguson (2000) found similar attitudes toward marriage among 28 never married, highly educated Chinese American and Japanese American women who were older than 45. These women perceived marriage as costly to their freedom and overall happiness because they were comfortable living alone. Most of those women were economically successful, immersed in a community of friends and family, and actively involved in their work or community projects (Ferguson, 2000).

Older single women of color, single aging lesbians, and older single women of lower socioeconomic status, unfortunately, have been omitted from research attention. More qualitative studies are needed to explore how these older single women resist the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality and ageism through the articulation of alternative narratives and by asserting more enabling identities.
A large body of research, guided by the feminist approach, explored the culturally dominant discourse of a woman’s midlife experience (Anderson & Stuart, 1994; Barett, 2005; Bernard & Davies, 2002; Horton, 2002; Klohnen, Vanderwater & Young; 1996; McQuaide, 1998; Ogle & Damhorst, 2005; Peterson & Stewart, 1996; Sheehy, 1995; Stewart & Ostrove, 1998; Tretewhaw, 2001). Ogle and Damhorst (2005) found that for women, the midlife experience and its assumed crisis have been defined using “loss paradigm”, with an emphasis upon women’s loss of reproductive capacity, sexuality, youth, appearance and the mothering role. Ogle and Damhorst asserted that many popular, scholarly, and medical discourses on middle-aged women have defined this life stage primarily in terms of menopause and the empty nest syndrome.

Feminist scholars, challenging the cultural stereotypes of aging and resisting marginalization, have offered a more positive interpretation of midlife, recognizing that the changes associated with midlife often serve as a conduit for meaningful self-reflection, exploration, and personal growth. The findings of a number of qualitative studies on midlife women (McQuide, 1998; Ogle & Damhorst, 2005; Tretewhaw, 2001) suggested that women who acknowledge the aging process and resist discourses that marginalize them, would emerge from midlife and its associated crisis empowered and newly self-confident. Steward and Ostrove (1998) analyzed a large sample of college-educated women who participated in five longitudinal studies. According to Steward and Ostrove, for most of middle-aged, college-educated women, “... the most common aspects are an increased sense of personal identity and confidence in personal efficacy, paralleled by somewhat increased preoccupation with aging itself” (p.1191). McQuide (1998) stated that “... the midlife women, who reported the greatest satisfaction with their lives, were
women who had a confidante or a group of friends and who felt that their midlife changes were understood by those around them” (p. 43).

At midlife, women tend to increase their investment in their careers because of the freedoms associated with the empty nest (Roberts & Friend, 1998). Work, according to Roberts & Friend, provides many opportunities for midlife women that lead to an increase in self-worth. Women actively pursuing careers enjoy earning money, successfully completing projects, working effectively with coworkers and receiving promotions and pay raises (McKay, 2001; Tretheway, 2001). Single, middle-aged women tend to be significantly more involved with their careers than married women (Still & Timms, 1998).

The study on older managerial and professional women (Still & Timms, 1998) highlighted a disturbing picture of older women experiencing the effects of the male culture on their working lives. Gender barriers, according to this study, were not diminished for these women and were strengthened further by the advance of seniority. The participants in this study, 33 older professional women, also noted the significance of age discrimination in the work place and the less than favorable attitudes of others toward their aging. McKay (2001) and Tretheway (2001) confirmed these findings and emphasized that aging successfully at work requires that midlife professional women make careful and considered choices, including passing for younger women. Interestingly, the older career woman, as was found by Still and Timms (1998), links personal identity to her career, although this is a common feature of males and their careers. For some midlife single professional women, work appears to be central to their self-esteem (McKay, 2001; Price, 2000; Still & Timms, 1998; Tretheway, 2001) and these women
recognize that they may experience difficulty in making the transition from work to retirement.

*Feminist Gerontology Approach to Women’s Aging*

It is notable that feminist researchers only recently began writing about the “culture of the aged” (Twigg, 2004, p. 60). According to Twigg, the exclusion of older women from the feminist critical realm itself reflected the gerophobia of the wider culture. A number of feminists researchers started addressing the meaning of the aged body in the context of the consumer culture (Bernard & Davies, 2000; Biggs, 2003; McMullin & Cairney, 2003; Peltola, Milkie & Presser, 2004; Twigg, 2004) and argued that the body becomes a project to be worked upon, fashioned, preserved, improved, and controlled, a site of self-identity and reflexivity as well as of consumption. And since aging, argued these feminist researchers, undermines women’s traditional source of power, many older women found themselves socially invisible, no longer the focus of male attention, sidelined in the power games and finding practically no reflection of their aging in the cultural imagery of the media (Twiggs, 2004).

Biggs (2003), Bernard and Davies (2000), analyzing feminist theories of aging and identity, pointed out that the common issues in these theories include the position of the embodied self and the power of appearance, negative effects on adult aging within the political economy approach, and the challenge to old-age identity with possibilities of self-development in later life. Biggs argued that the masquerade of aging becomes a part of a coping strategy of identity management with respect to age and gender; the masquerade of aging also becomes a tactical maneuver used to negotiate contradictions between social ageism and increased personal integration.
Feminist researchers (Bernard & Davies, 2000; Biggs, 2003; Maierhofer, 2000; Ray, 2004) emphasized that research exploring age and privilege opens a wide array of questions and raises a stimulus for greater theoretical, empirical, and practical development of feminist gerontology. Their work helps to make explicit the economic, political, social, and cultural bases of women’s aging. Sufficient evidence exists to cast doubt on the culturally constructed myths and stereotypes surrounding single, professional, highly educated, Baby Boom women who are aging while resisting the discourse of gender, compulsory heterosexuality, and ageism.

A review of literature suggests that single, highly educated professional Baby Boom women comprise a significant cohort among the U.S. population. They face their aging process within a context of predominately negative and deficient stereotyping. This study will explore and document relevant themes in this phenomenon among a small cohort of women currently ages 47 through 59 years old.
Method

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research, as stated by Heppner & Heppner (2004), is influenced by the social constructivist tradition, which asserts that objective reality can never be fully understood and that there are many ways of interpreting realities and finding truths. A researcher, according to this tradition, is an observer and a participant situated in the world where he or she studies a phenomenon by trying to interpret the meanings that people make out of their experience of the phenomenon. Qualitative research relies on rich descriptions of studied phenomena in an ever-changing world and strives to reflect individuals' lived experiences through writing and interpretation. Creswell (1998) defines qualitative research as follows:

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting (p.15).

Feminist theory posits that people’s meanings are shaped by the social, political, cultural, and economic forces in the environment (Bernard & Davis, 2000). Feminists, using qualitative research, attempt to challenge social constructions that are so deeply embedded in society that they are assumed to be true (Heppner, Kivlighan & Wampold, 1999). The present qualitative study is in line with the feminist critical theoretical realm that understands that traditional roles for women have been socially determined, and that this social reality can be altered.
Grounded Theory Approach

Unlike quantitative methods, where testing of existing theory or fitting the data into preconceived concepts is a main goal of research, a grounded theory approach derives theoretical concepts from the data analysis and is grounded in the data. This qualitative strategy of inquiry is the most appropriate for studying a phenomenon related to the social context in which it actually occurs. An inductive process of analyzing qualitative data by repeated sorting, coding and comparison, discovering broad themes and building a theoretical model provides the necessary rigor to generate a rich explanatory theory that closely approximates the reality it represents (Holmes, 1999 in Heppner, 2004).

Role of the Researcher

The researcher worked on setting aside any preconceptions, ideas or notions so that theory can emerge inductively from the data. Since the researcher was at the beginning of middle life transition herself, it was important that she reflected on her attitudes toward aging, explored her professional identity as a middle-aged woman, and tapped into her cultural stereotypes of aging by noticing her behaviors, feelings and thoughts concerning older people, especially older women. The researcher kept an introspective journal to analyze her knowledge, cultural stereotypes and biases toward aging that could affect the way the data were analyzed and interpreted (Heppner, Kivlighan & Wampold, 1999). The researcher was able to discover her biases toward sexuality in older age using journaling and later incorporated questions about sexual needs and aging body in the interviews.
Participants

The participants in the study were 10 women ages 47-59, each with 16 or more years of education, currently working and either divorced, widowed or single, who have not shared their household with parents, children or partners for at least the past 5 years. It was expected that apart from these broad parameters, that women self-defined as single. A snowball method was employed to recruit the participants of the study with the goal of achieving a sample with variations in ethnic background, sexual orientation, current employment, health status, and income. The researcher asked friends and colleagues to talk to women interested in participation in the study and provide them with the researcher’s contact information. The researcher, following feminist emphasis on difference, strived to ensure that the sample was comprised of women with different histories, experiences, and racial, ethnic, and sexual identification, so that better understanding of the multiple dimensions of the social context in which these women experience aging can be achieved (Warnke, 1994).

Initial screening was conducted during the first face-to-face interview. First the researcher contacted the women via the phone and scheduled a first meeting. The phone contact was very brief to confirm the time and place for the first meeting. During the first meeting, the researcher administered the Beck Depression Inventory-II (The BDI-II) to prospective participants in order to screen for clinical depression, as the possibility existed that reflecting on one’s aging and mortality during in-depth interviews could exacerbate any currently present symptoms. The point of exclusion for BDI-II was set at 15 points, a score that signifies mild depression. During the initial meeting, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and the procedures involved, which included interviews and
focus groups. The participants gave informed consent in writing, which addressed their participation in this study.

The incentives for the participants included a complementary lunch at the time of the debriefing and a package of information containing resources for successful aging. The women would also receive an abstract of the dissertation.

Data Collection

The researcher met with each participant two to three times. She also conversed on by phone with some of them and exchanged emails with three others. Emails and phone conversations were primarily with women who lived in a rural area of the Pacific Northwest. The actual interviews lasted 1 to 2.5 hours and the researcher had 15 to 45 minute follow-up meetings and debriefings with 8 participants. The researcher met with the participants in their homes or in public places that provided sufficient privacy to allow the recording of their interviews. Only three women chose to participate in a focus group that was conducted for 1.5 hours. Due to their time constraints, three participants requested communication via email when the researcher conducted additional theoretical sampling.

Ten in-depth individual interviews, six follow-up conversations, and one focus group were used to collect data. A demographic information questionnaire was given at the beginning at the interview and the research questions were asked, along with follow-up probes and inquires that were employed for further clarification. After an individual interview, each woman was invited to discuss aging in a focus group format. An additional informed consent letter was prepared for those who chose to participate in focus
groups because the level of confidentiality in focus groups differs from the level of confidentiality in individual interviews.

While the empathic atmosphere of in-depth interviews allowed the researcher to elicit a rich, detailed picture of the participant’s reflections on their own experiences, the interactive environment of the focus group served as a valuable source of insights and comparisons that participants made among while discussing their individual experiences and opinions. As stated by Morgan (1997), “focus groups reveal aspects of experiences and perspectives that would not be as accessible without group interactions” (p.20). At the same time, the confidentiality and safety associated with individual interviews encouraged people to talk about some sensitive aspects of their experiences, which typically would not be shared in public discussion. By combining in-depth individual interviews and focus groups as the two methods of gathering qualitative data, a body of knowledge was obtained, which was sufficient to develop grounded theory.

The following questions were discussed with the participants of the study during individual interviews:

1. What does aging mean to you?
2. When did you first become aware of being a middle-aged woman?
3. What is your experience with being an older professional woman?
4. What are advantages and disadvantages of aging as a single woman?
5. Are there cultural and social influences that affect your attitude toward your aging? What are they?
6. Are there religious or spiritual influences that affect your attitude toward your aging? What are they?
7. Where do you see yourself in 10 years from now?
8. Where do you see yourself in 20 years from now?
9. Where do you see yourself in 30 years from now?
10. Who do you think will be your primary caretaker when and if one is needed?
11. Who will be your support system in the future?
12. What does the most desirable model of aging look like to you?
13. What do you plan to do to improve the transition into the next stage of aging and how do you feel about your plan?

One small focus group (three participants) discussed questions in the following order:

1. What does aging mean to you?
2. What social and cultural influences impact your perception of your own aging?
3. What strategies do you employ to challenge cultural stereotypes of aging and to negotiate your own aging as a single, professional, highly educated woman?

The researcher used probing questions asked in an open-ended way to specify and clarify women’s experiences with aging and to probe for more information without naming the dimensions of aging or its social contexts. Interviews and focus group discussions were tape recorded and transcribed. Audiotapes and transcribed data were safely stored to ensure security and the protection of confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory was developed using a special set of procedures for analysis: open, axial, and selective coding. During the open coding phase, the researcher analyzed the narrative data for salient categories of information and saturated the categories to achieve an insight into the category. The initial categories were descriptive with names
coming directly from data. After the saturation of the initial categories, the researcher used them to derive constructed categories. The researcher highlighted subcategories, or properties, for each category, and reduced the narrative data to a small set of categories that represented multiple perspectives on studied phenomenon (Creswell, 1998).

The unfolding of a central phenomenon of aging as a single, highly educated, professional woman, varied greatly among the participants. The complexity of their experiences shaped their stories and allowed the researcher to extract a rich account of the participants’ subjective views on aging. The audio recording was a source of a concrete and detailed record while the written field notes, in addition to recorded interviews, reflected the researcher’s reaction to her encounters with the participants, the settings and the contexts in which interactions occurred.

Memo writing was used throughout the entire open, axial, and selective coding processes to maintain an audit trial. Memo writing is one of the primary features of grounded theory because it facilitates the constant comparative method and marks the evolution of categories and their relationships. After a preliminary analysis of the transcripts and the emerging categories of open coding, the researcher questioned potential connections between the categories and the evolving of hierarchy, which allowed the organization of subcategories and sets of categories. Memo writing helped the researcher to understand the participants’ experiences with aging and provided progressively more depth to aid in understanding the central phenomenon.

To further develop a conceptual understanding of what was happening to single, highly educated, professional women who were aging, the researcher asked the following questions, “What is happening within the data? What is the general sense of aging for the
participants? What underlies both the advantages and disadvantages of aging as a single woman? How does this statement and category compare with an opposite statement and related category? What could explain the discrepancy between negative social stereotyping of a single older woman and the reported positive experiences of the participants’ aging? What do the participants mean when they define themselves as “powerful”, while they simultaneously discuss the diminishing of social and political power as they age?”

As the study progressed, the researcher realized that the main categories were incomplete; the descriptions of some categories were inconsistent and clearly contradictory, thus leading to more questions. The researcher had to solicit more data from the participants in order to answer those questions that were in line with a feminist approach to women’s aging, political power, oppression, and older women’s resistance to the socially constructed and imposed role of “Crazy Old Maid.”

The researcher used a strategy of theoretical sampling to advance her analytical thinking about tentative categories. According to Charmaz (2006), “In short, theoretical sampling pertains only to conceptual and theoretical development; it is not about representing a population or increasing the statistical generalizability of your results” (p.100). Writing about theoretical sampling, Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggested that, This responsive approach makes sampling open and flexible. Concepts are derived from data during analysis and questions about those concepts drive the next round of data collection. The research process feeds on itself. … in theoretical sampling the researcher is not sampling persons but concepts. (p. 144)
The researcher formed follow-up hypotheses regarding a uniting theme in the descriptions of the advantages and disadvantages of aging as a single professional woman, the dimensions of power held by an older single woman, the stated priorities and the preferred choices of strategies for coping with aging, and about the existence of the void, the longing for social identity, role models, and a name that would more accurately define a highly educated, professional, single Baby Boom woman. The researcher contacted the participants to confirm these hypotheses and was able to collect additional data from six of the ten participants. The participants enthusiastically engaged in a dialogue with the researcher and provided substantial data to “close the gaps” in the analysis of the explored phenomenon. Three participants chose to answer additional questions via email, one participant answered the researcher’s questions via phone, and two participants agreed to have a short face-to-face meeting with the researcher. The researcher was unsuccessful in reaching the remaining four women as they either moved out of state or changed their places of work and phone numbers.

Additional sets of data were analyzed and contrasted with previously coded data using the same stages of analysis in grounded theory. The researcher also checked data for negative cases, or the variables that, to some degree, contradicted emerging grounded theory. The researcher made a decision to stop gathering additional data when the same properties began to emerge from conceptual analysis and when the categories became saturated. As Glaser (2001) stated,

Saturation is not seeing the same pattern over and over again. It is the conceptualization of comparisons of these incidents which yield different properties of the pattern, until no new properties of the pattern emerge. This yields
the conceptual density that when integrated into hypotheses make up the body of
the generated grounded theory with theoretical completeness. (p.191)

During the axial coding stage, the researcher treated each single category as a
central phenomenon and explored the interrelationships between categories to determine
the causal conditions that influence the central phenomenon, the strategies for addressing
the phenomenon, the context and intervening conditions that shape the strategies, and the
consequences of undertaking the strategies. Creswell (1998), describing axial coding,
outlined the end result of this stage of analysis as a creation of “... a coding paradigm, or a
theoretical model that visually portrays the interrelationship of these axial coding
categories of information” (p.151). A conditional matrix, reflecting a broader analysis,
was constructed during the selective coding stage of data analysis by building a story that
connected all of the categories and by creating a visual diagram of the central
phenomenon, its conditions and consequences (Creswell, 1998). Finally, theoretical
propositions were based on the empirical grounding of the study to advance the
understanding of generated and systemically related concepts.

A theoretical model was developed describing (a) women’s experiences with their
aging, (b) strategies women employ to deal with aging, (c) larger cultural and social
contexts that influence women’s attitudes and strategies, and (d) the consequences of their
strategies. Categories of each component of the theoretical model were identified and
illustrated by narrative data.

For ongoing verification of the work, six participants “checked” emerging
categories and provided additional input into the development of the theoretical model.
For supplemental validation, a relevant literature review was used to assess the accuracy of the findings and variations that were built into the theory.

**Anticipated Ethical Considerations**

In order to protect confidentiality of the participants all the coding was done by a certified transcriber using pseudonyms chosen by the participants and the record of the real names and pseudonyms is stored in a locked safety box. Audiotapes and CDs will be destroyed after 7 years; written transcripts will be destroyed after 15 years.

The research topic was very sensitive, as aging is widely associated with loss, illnesses, loneliness, and dying. Therefore, the careful planning and conducting of the focus group, where participants received support and reassurance from others, was essential. The researcher, a licensed mental health counselor, provided encouragement, empathic reflection, and active listening during the individual interviews to help diminish the anxiety and distress of interviewees. Each woman was informally “debriefed” after the interview and after the focus group. One free session with a licensed mental health counselor was offered to help the women reflect, in depth, on the experience of participating in the study, if needed. All of the participants confirmed that the experience of being interviewed was pleasant and useful and none of them requested professional help with the processing of their experience after the interview and/or focus group.
Results

Sixteen single, professional, college educated women contacted the researcher expressing the desire to be interviewed but only ten of them met the study criteria and then became participants. Some of the researcher’s friends and colleagues misunderstood the criteria for the participation when referring women and either arranged meetings with the researcher in advance or gave the researcher’s phone number to women who were still either going through the divorce, living with adult children, or older than 60. Six women who did not meet the criteria expressed their strong desire to be interviewed regardless. The researcher conducted informal interviews with them without audio recording. Although those interviews expanded the researcher’s understanding of women’s aging and provided a few interesting insights along with some negative cases highlighting variations in the individual experiences of aging, their narratives were not used in this study in the development of the final conditional matrix which was constructed based strictly on the material provided by the actual participants.

Demographic Characteristics

The sample consisted of 10 women ages 47-59. Four participants resided in a rural area in the Pacific Northwest. Six women lived in large cities in the Pacific Northwest. Seven women reported owning a house or a condominium and three reported that they were renting apartments.

All of the women were Caucasian; two women self-identified as homosexual and eight women self-identified as heterosexual. Four women were divorced and five were never married. One of the women with homosexual orientation self-identified as a widow and explained that she considered the long-term union with her deceased partner to have
been a marriage. Only one woman had adult children. At the time of the interview, nine women reported that they were not involved in significant relationships and one woman reported that she has been dating the same man for about 10 years. This participant insisted that she was single because she resided alone, was financially independent, and planned to retire as a single person. Two women in the sample were semi-actively exploring dating via Internet-based dating services.

Eight out of ten participants rated their health as “fair.” Two participants reported significant health problems. One of the participants reported having a disability due to Bipolar I disorder. Another acknowledged that she was morbidly obese and had difficulty ambulating. Eight participants expressed their concern about being moderately to significantly overweight. Two participants had knee replacement surgeries.

Nine women were employed at the time of the interview and one participant was actively looking for a new job. A participant, who was 59 years old when she was interviewed, shared that she planned to retire when she is 60 years old. Three women changed careers in their mid-40s. Three women had Bachelor’s degrees, seven participants had obtained Master’s degrees, and two participants were pursuing a Doctoral degree at the time of the interviews.

Nine out of ten women asserted that they were spiritual or religious. Four women identified Buddhism as their spiritual practice. Five participants stated that they were practicing Christians. Demographic information is shown in Table 1 (p. 36) and background information is presented in Table 2 (p. 37). Two women stated that they would like to use their first names and eight women chose pseudonyms.
Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of 10 Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Residence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Broker</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>House (own)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sp.</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Theater Director</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>House (own)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toni</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sage</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Social Worker</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>Condo (own)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kris</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>D.A.</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Condo (own)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Program Director</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>House (own)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dora</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Business Owner</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>House (own)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Di</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Therapist</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Social Worker</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>House (own)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

*Background Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Religious (Spiritual) affiliation</th>
<th>Health Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sp.</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toni</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sage</td>
<td>Homosexual</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kris</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dora</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Di</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Homosexual</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Meaning of aging.

Three very distinct themes emerged when the participants were asked about their experience with aging. These were:

1. Denying or challenging a conventional definition of being middle-aged.
2. Embracing maturity, joy, freedom, independence, and the choice of personal development.
3. Accepting body deterioration and coping with aging body.

Denying or challenging a definition of middle age and aging.

All ten participants, describing aging, asserted that they did not identify as middle-aged. Irene, talking about aging, said, “Aging is not something I think about actively… Most of my friends are my contemporaries and I guess we don’t necessarily think of ourselves as middle-aged yet.” Sage echoed,

Well, aging actually means very little to me. I look at the rest of my family, I am still relatively young…. It isn’t something I worry about. I don’t identify myself like that, as middle-aged. I know intellectually that I am a middle-aged woman but I don’t really define myself that way… In some ways I define myself very ageless and I don’t let age dictate how I live my life.

For Sp., aging had nothing to do with her spirit but only her body, “Aging is a deterioration of my body. My spirit is the same.” Di asserted, “I don’t feel that old.” Kris stated, “I’ve always felt that I was younger than my years. I think the middle-aged thing kind of passed me by.” Dora pondered about being a middle-aged woman: “This is my age. I don’t – whatever middle-age is, I don’t feel it. And I don’t think I look it. I just
don’t identify with age. Until I start to really hurt physically, it’s not an issue.” Toni concentrated on age as being a choice: “And really so much of aging to me isn’t just about your body. It’s about letting your mind decide if it wants to get old or not, you know?”

This denial of aging and resistance to subscribing to a conventional vision of being middle-aged and becoming old manifested in women’s subjective sense of time and their change in self-identity. The participants were asked to describe their lives in 10, 20, and 30 years. Most of them continued distancing from “being older” and saw some very minimal changes in their health, lifestyle, and emotional well being in 10 and even 20 years and hoped to preserve their current state of “not being old” for years to come. Di shared that, “In ten years my life will be the same. Working and writing books…. In 20 years… I see myself doing pretty much the same, maybe slowing down a little. … And I never think beyond twenty years.” Initially, a few participants refused to think about their lives in 30 years and felt at loss trying to venture that far ahead. Their responses reflected an abrupt change in self-identity when they imagined being in their late 80s and early 90s.

Sp., after some probing, exclaimed that, “Oh, in thirty years I will be really old! Man, I will move to live in an [name] apartment where they put the old people.”

Irene responded in a similar manner:

I am actually looking forward to retirement because I want to kayak at 6 in the morning. In twenty years I still envision myself as a very active 77-year old who is pursuing all the things I love to do now… and well, in 30 years I will be old enough to probably get myself into a retirement home kind of thing.
Freedom, choice, self-acceptance, independence, and wisdom of aging.

Women talked at length about positive changes that aging brings about. Sp., describing her current stage of life, said, “I guess really the theme of where I’m right now is independence, is adulthood independence. And truly having choice, truly knowing what choice means. And self-acceptance. Less insecurity, a greater need for rhythm, a greater need for routine.”

Mary shared similar experience:

I find that I don’t care – I think, in my 40s I stopped caring quite so much what other people thought and started more relying on what I thought and felt. In some ways it’s wonderfully freeing that I don’t care as much about other people’s expectations. I wouldn’t give up my sense of freedom and my sense of self and identity to go back to how I felt physically in my 20s.

For Sue, becoming mature was about letting go of control and becoming confident and joyful:

Yeah, our bodies are getting older, but I think we become wiser. I don’t feel like I need a lot of control. I control the things I can, but I’ve come to realize there are some things you can’t control. It’s very important to maintain flexibility and ability to go with the flow. I’ve matured, I’ve learned so much and learn to listen and look at what I can do about something. I think that just comes with aging, is that ability to observe and to take it in versus reacting and making situations harder than they have to be. Watching people who are older than me, watching them mature and age and watch them still maintain a sense of joy and a sense of confidence… really influenced me.
Spirituality and Religion as a source of personal strength and coping with aging.

It was apparent that for nine out of ten participants their religious or spiritual beliefs contributed to the development of a strong sense of self and, ultimately, to the way they constructed the meaning of their aging and dying.

*Irene*, who is very active in a rural church community, said that, “… the spiritual practice helps to calm and to find balance and approach things with optimism rather than dreading them.”

*Sue* shared:

I believe in really turning over a lot of things that I can’t change to my God and I think that’s one of the advantages over the years of spiritual growth as well. You begin to learn how to turn things over and not dwell on them so much. …I felt this peace and took it day by day. And so I guess it became a strength, I mean a source of strength for me. And so I see that happening as I age, too. I won’t worry so much about things, I’ll be able to set them aside.

*Toni*, a practicing Buddhist, was very passionate about the role of spirituality in her life:

I am a Tibetan Buddhist. In Tibetan Buddhism, age and wisdom are what you want. If you are lucky enough to live until you are older, you are lucky enough to keep learning and compound what you know. And so I probably don’t have the standard view on aging that a lot of single women have. … It’s a different way of looking at things. I visited and talked with a lot of older members of my Sangha… they don’t have a lot of money but they have tremendous experiences, they are a lot of fun, they know who they are, they have accepted themselves. And that to me is what I want to be. When you become a Buddhist, the first teaching you get is the
The first noble truth is all of life is birth, old age, disease, and death. Accept the fact that you are going to get old. Old age, right there. And it takes nothing to be afraid of. It’s something to understand.

Sp., who also considers Buddhism her spiritual practice, had a different take on its influence in aging:

I find that as I am aging, I am moving away from the concept of God and I am moving into more of the thinking stuff. I am moving into this place where I am getting that it’s all about my thoughts. I would say that Buddhism is helping me support this idea that I am thinking and creating whatever is going on. … There is a part of me that connects more and more to this notion that I am not my body, that I am an energy force, that I am thoughts and energy and so as I am aging, strangely enough, I am observing the deterioration of my body, but I am not freaking out about it. … So I think my spirituality is helping me to objectify the whole process, so it’s really not about slowing things down and trying to change anything. It’s really about staying marveling and in wonder about what is happening to me as I age. … And that is a direct link between my spirituality and my aging process, and my attitude.

Di described the grappling with the finality of death and the urgency of using the time she has left to achieve her goals:

I am an atheist. I have been for many, many, many years. I don’t feel any need to make peace with God before I go. I don’t even consider that – you know, when I die, I am dead. So again, for me I guess it would be the fact that it is when I die, I
am dead, so everything I got to do, I got to do it now, so there is that pressure of getting everything done before I die.

*Living in aging body.*

For many participants, aches and pains of aging body and the loss of resilience and energy were the first signs of aging they had to confront and accept. Some of those changes came with menopause, some with illnesses, and some were a result of physiological aging.

*Sp.* succinctly described:

> It’s a deterioration process of my body. It’s like getting my muscles weaker. My eyes are getting less – you know, they are getting worse. My hearing is getting worse. My voice is going. My voice is getting gravelly. I don’t have the same resilience to falls, things like that. I get tired quicker and my memory is sometimes good, sometimes not good. It’s harder for me to lose weight. My metabolism is slower.

*Mary* stated:

> I am a little frustrated that I no longer have energy I used to and that I find that I can’t burn the candle on both ends like I used to. I used to be able to get away with, you know, a few hour of sleep here and there and bounce back pretty quickly. Doesn’t happen quite so easily.

For *Sue*, aging was about menopause and losing her mobility due to illness:

> …going through menopause and realizing that I hit that mark in life that women anticipate, sometimes fear. So it became my first awareness of aging. My body, that’s right. And a few years later… I have had a history of arthritis since my 30s
and I started having some joint – required some joint replacements. And that really hit me then that I was aging. I think I became very fearful of that.

Accepting an aging body, according to the participants, is a process with specific strategies that require awareness and consciousness about everyday choices.

Sp. said:

I am not really afraid of getting old. But sometimes it’s a real pain in the neck. It takes some effort, especially with my body kind of just like giving out, slowly giving out because I can’t rely on it. I can’t take things for granted anymore. That’s the biggest piece. Everything – consciousness is the key for me. The more consciousness I have about stuff, the easier it seems. When I am not conscious of what I am doing, I am either getting hurt or I am creating a huge hassle down the road. I got to think as best I can right now. I noticed that when I get bumped up against something that disturbs me, the next day my body is like in pain, and so now I am recognizing more than ever before somatization. I think that the more I let go, the healthier I am physically.

Mary shared, “It’s something I have to on some level accept and adapt in my life.”

Toni also talked about acceptance:

You know you slow down as you get older. And you sort of adjust and go: Okay, what can my body do realistically? What can it not do? My body now does not do what it did when I was 20, and now I am 47. Would I like it to? Sure. But is it going to happen? No. That’s life.
**Kris**, who struggled with joint pain, confirmed, “Your physical health has a lot to do with your mental attitude. And I am in pain all the time. I can deal with that. And I got to take care of myself.”

**Donna** described an everyday struggle with joint pain as,

… needing to center myself and listen to my body, really listen. I can’t force and push it anymore. The price is just too high. There are things that I won’t do anymore like running but I still find things to keep me active. It’s about choices, wise choices now. I learn and become an expert in healing my body.

**Aging and sexuality.**

Only four participants chose to talk openly about their sexual needs and aging although the researcher did some gentle probing on sexuality with all ten participants. Instead of focusing on sexuality and body needs, six participants preferred to talk about dating in general and the importance of looks and body image. Some women looked really uncomfortable and asked to move on with the questions and some dismissed the issue of sexuality and aging as unimportant in their lives. The researcher gained more understanding of their responses when the deeply ingrained social stereotyping of an older single woman unfolded in discussions about cultural and social influences that shaped women’s attitudes toward sexuality in older age. Four women who chose to respond provided the researcher with valuable insights.

**Mary** talked about self-reliance in satisfying her sexual needs:

Yeah. It sounds probably terrible. I don’t have the energy or interest in taking care of somebody else’s needs and I am perfectly fine with myself. I just at this time in my life feel like I don’t need to have another person involved.
*Toni* shared her insight into sexuality and aging:

It isn’t like I was when I was 20. But that doesn’t mean it goes away. It just looks different. … For me, sexuality is largely in your head. I think for me it’s like the motivation for so many things, including sex, is: What’s behind this? Am I doing this because I have physical need in terms of gratification? Am I doing this because I feel like I need to have a man? That’s why I would just as soon not have sex than have it with a wrong person, because if I am having it with the wrong person, that’s about my feeling that I am needy and need to prove that I am valuable. Beyond that, it’s like: Okay, I’ve got myself. That’s what I have got realistically. So, there you go. … Masturbation is always an option.

*Donna* talked about a change in a way she expressed her sexuality:

When I was young, I had to have sex and I don’t really care, I had many lovers and sex was the thing that made me feel alive and validated. On a physical level, it was something I needed badly. Now it’s different. I have the need for sex but it’s not as blind as before and I can go on without having a partner for a long, long time. But I can really pleasure myself better now as I got to know my body better. I have a more intimate relationship with my body, you know.

*Kris* echoed *Donna*’s experience:

Oh well, there is always masturbation, and definitely glad I figured out how to do that. And I think that’s – that works for me. But it’s just one aspect of sexuality. And I’ve already been through menopause, so that was, you know, took a period of adjustment, definitely, to where your sexuality was and all that. … My projection of sexuality, I’m comfortable with that, you know. Sometimes people are like:
Hmm, she’s never been married. But I think I come across as, you know, a heterosexual woman who has been out there and had a good time and might have another good time and, you know, I am comfortable with that.

*Overcoming regrets and adjusting to living and aging single.*

When women described advantages and disadvantages of aging single, they contrasted their experiences and expectations of aging with women who have traditional roles of mothers and wives. There was a lot of grief, sadness, and tears when some of the participants talked about an unavoidable realization that they will never have children and grandchildren, may never get married, and that their lives would not follow the conventional script of their mothers and/or other married women.

*Toni,* who was previously married, talked about the acceptance of the fact that she may never have a partner again:

I am actually in a process now of sort of thinking about what it means to accept the fact that I may never get married… And that does make me sad. I won’t lie about that. There are things that I really miss about my marriage. I miss having somebody to go out and do things with. I miss having the common vocabulary that comes from shared experiences. …. And realistically that’s sad. I realistically hurt from that.

*Di,* who also was married before, reflected:

I can’t have kids, so sometimes I regret that I don’t have anybody to pass along who I am to. There is an aloneness to being a single older women that sometimes… it doesn’t distress me but it pops up every now and then, that I wish I had kids. Because everybody else in my life is pretty much out of school, settled
down, has the mortgage, the 2.5 kids. And the 2.5 kids are now having kids. …It’s really I am kind of out of place since I don’t have the typical life. I go to a lot of things by myself instead of as a couple or as a family. I’ve never been to Disneyland and probably will never go. So that kind of leaves me on the outside of some things.

*Dora* stated, “That has been my plan, is to be with someone and to be married. I’ve not been married before and it bothers me, it hurts, because I would like a companion and a playmate.”

*Mary*, who worked in female-dominated profession, talked about feeling like an “outsider” and not being able to share common experiences with female coworkers:

People talk about their lives… and when people are showing pictures of their children or talking about their spouses or – sometimes I feel a little odd, that, you know, I don’t have that to talk about. … It feels a little funny not having children to talk about what they are doing, you know their latest…. I sometimes feel a little awkward when people go around and talk about their lives, and I say: Oh, I am single.

The reality of aging single, managing health, finances, leisure times, household chores, and making major decisions about retirement in women’s narratives was polarized around two identities: an identity of an independent, strong, wise, and self-sufficient mature woman in charge of her life and a deficient identity of someone who is lacking traditional support, comfort, and intimacy of marriage or a long-time partnership.

*Irene* talked about being independent and devoting financial resources and time to herself:
You can make your own decisions about how you choose to manage things. You don’t need to have permission for the time from your partner to do something different. If you want to move to another community or a different climate… you can make that decision easily. As a single woman, I don’t have the same kinds of financial pressures that people with families do. I don’t have to worry about college education for my kids.

*Di*, who was working on getting a Doctorate at the time of the interview, echoed:

I don’t have to put up with kids and I don’t have to put up with a husband. I am not accountable to anybody. I do what I do when I want to do it. I have all the advantages in the world being a single person. I don’t have a mortgage. If I want to go to school, I go to school. To me – I have it a lot easier than most people around me.

*Kris* admitted that she enjoyed being single:

I like the independence of being single and living alone. I like having my own little house. I like my own schedule. I like to have my messy house the way I like it. I don’t feel lonely very often. If I want to go out, I can go out. I like all the aspects of being on my own. … I would rather be taking care of myself than be in a marriage where I had someone who was keeping me down, not being supportive.

*Sp.*, contrasting her single life with married life, shared:

I don’t miss the hassles. I don’t miss the compromise. I don’t miss the balance of trying to find these balances of people’s needs. As a matter of fact, I celebrate the fact that I can do everything in my own time and space. I can have my house any
way I want it. I can do things when I want it and nobody is telling me. I feel so adult. I get to say what I want to do.

*Toni* commented on having the luxury of time and making commitments and investments in the community, “I know that I have much more time to do things like volunteer work… I get to help others in a very different way than if I was married with a family and kids.”

However, such independence and freedom of choice came with a steep price for all the participants.

*Kris* talked about some common expectations that did not realize in her life:

> Well, you keep thinking: Oh, I’ll marry somebody and they’ll have money or they’ll have good income. And it did not happen. I am a black sheep. You can tell. I am not a good financial planner to begin with. My sister… married a lawyer, even though she has a journalist degree, when she started having kids, she quit working. She doesn’t have to balance a check. And financial support and emotional support go together.

And while women emphasized the fact that they don’t have to take care of husbands or children, they pointed out that they are forced to become self-reliant and face upcoming frailty of aging alone. *Di* sighed, “I have no one to take care of me. I always have to do my own laundry, no matter how sick I am I always have to take care of myself because there is nobody in the house to take care of me.”

*Sue* expressed her fears:

> I worry about losing independence and not having people immediately around me to help me. … That’s really my biggest concern, is my health interfering with my
independence. I will need some care that normally could be managed by other family members you live with, but not having that, I guess, I worry about that. Sp., who lives in a rural community, lamented:

I have to hire people to move stuff for me. I have to hire people to cut trees down. You know, the things that I used to be able to do for myself, I have to hire out now, find somebody. And being alone, there are so many repairs and things like that around my house that I can’t do myself because if I take it apart, maybe I am not going to have the stamina to put it back together again. … I would say living alone aging is more expensive than when I was single living alone and younger.

Along with lack of care giving provided by close family in older age, the necessity of taking care of finances and retirement appeared to be another major concern for the participants.

Irene, an owner of a successful business, stated, “Clearly, no one else is providing for my retirement. I am not looking to a spouse to provide support for retirement but I am responsible for that myself.” And Di commented on lack of finances: “I don’t have a second income coming so that everything I do has got to be with my money. Finances are always tight for me.” Mary, Donna, Dora, Sue, Kris, and Sage also talked about the hardship of living on a single income.

While some of the participants in the study are still intensely mourning the absence of motherhood and marriage in their lives, they asserted that they exercised the power and the ability to be in charge of their lives. When it came to the disadvantages of aging as a single person, they dismissed the notion of a deficiency in their aging.

Mary pointed out:
The disadvantages are things that you can certainly change. Although I don’t have children or a spouse or partner, I certainly have family and friends that I have cultivated relationships with… so I have plenty of people to call if I am lonely. I know deep down that if I fall into hard times or got sick or needed help, the people I have chosen to have in my life would come to my aid just as I would come to their. There is actually some unique power in choosing the specific people I want involved. I guess you are choosing if you have a relationship too, but sort of creating your own family.

Toni was even more blatant:

The resolution is essentially I have to be able to prepare myself financially and emotionally. There is no other cure short of going out and finding Mr. Wonderful, but I just can’t magically depend on finding Mr. Wonderful. I have to make sure that I can take care of myself as long as possible and not to have to be a burden to other people or myself.

Moreover, six participants further clarified that contrary to the culturally constructed pathology of aging single, they were at peace with their choices and were satisfied with the status of their lives at the time.

Sage talked about finding a deep meaning in singlehood:

I suppose some may think living alone results in conflict, but it is not personally a problem for me. I am living the life I have chosen. I have no conflict over my choice. I suppose that some in society would see my life as being less fulfilling but I have to dispute that. I am 58-years old and at a very fulfilling place in my life.… If I were married or living with a partner, I would not have the freedom to travel
and do the work. This creates no conflict for me; I am proud of my work and happy that I can influence the lives of others.

**Mary** reflected on changes in the level of assertiveness and freedom that came with aging:

I actually feel like I had a lot of more conflict in my life in terms of my own expectations when I was younger. As I am going close to turning 50, I actually feel like I have less conflict in terms of people I want and I choose to have involved in my life and the priorities I make in my life and my relationships with family and friends, and with society.

**Sue** shared that being married has not been a priority for her:

Everyone has to decide what they value. I mean, some people probably would find being married important enough that they would be seeking a spouse – you know, where others would decide that they are content and find other ways to deal with financial issues or extra help. I have come to view that and accept that, been very realistic about that.

**Becoming an older professional woman.**

An important part of the participants’ self-identity that was reflected in their stories related to being a professional woman. For single women, work became a source of satisfaction and a basis for establishing friendships and networks. Women’s reflections on their career development in this phase of life and thoughts about approaching retirement age differ in many ways and portray a wide range of experiences depending on their professional fields, changing careers in mid-life for some participants, and the decision to accept retirement at some point in their careers or to continue working “until death.” Many participants commented that they enjoyed the sense of respect, authority and
seniority that they earned as professional women. Women spoke about being able to share their experience with younger professionals and about the satisfaction of being mentors and experts in their professional fields.

*Kris* commented:

> I think I am viewed with professional respect because I’ve been around a long time and I am working in a very narrow field of law that’s particular. So for me, a lot of my professional prestige, perhaps, is that I am well respected in my profession. I work with businesses but I also work with many environmental groups. I try to breach gaps between them. I am on many committees and people remember me. These are things that I get more satisfaction from.

*Di* shared, “I guess there is a little more respect… the age factor has an advantage for me.”

*Sp.*, who worked as a director of theater production, noticed:

> Actually, being older in my profession works for me, which is – that’s a very good paradox. I noticed that the older I get, the more accumulated life experiences, the more inventory I have to pull from inside of me, and that’s very useful, especially working with younger people.

*Sue* also focused on mentoring young coworkers but highlighted that she continued to learn from younger colleagues:

> I’ve come to, I would say just in the last few years, come to really appreciate the younger professionals around me and have come to enjoy the differences we have… I think because I’ve earned some wisdom and I can learn a lot from younger professionals as well, and so I love to learn and, you know, so I’ve sort of evolved as a person, and so I have just felt like I have – I could be a mentor to
them, which I enjoy doing, but I can also learn from them… I have a really strong network professionally and personally over the years…. that network can really be helpful for me. As I started a new organization, it was just so much fun to sort of solicit the support of people in my network.

Mary, who worked as a social worker, shared:

I noticed that I have a lot of respect from younger women at work and I can really help them and share my experience. I would say, respect is what I earned and I enjoy being an older woman in my profession. I am in social work where experience is very valued. I gain more authority with years and more influence. I actually like being at this stage of my career because I can do more and know that I am doing.

However, for Dora, who was looking for a job at the time of the interview, and for Sp. who observed her age-mates seeking employment, the reality of being an older woman in search for a job was troubling. They discussed age discrimination and inequality in the job market. Dora was concerned about not being able to secure a job because she was competing against younger professionals: “It’s harder to find a job being my age and my gender. They would rather hire somebody younger.”

Sp. asserted:

I would be terrified to start looking for a job at my age. As an actress, play writer, or a director of production, I would stand no chance today. I see my friends who can’t find a job for years because of their age. In my industry, they want young, promising, revolutionary people, new generations. They wouldn’t want me.
These observations surfaced again when the participants talked about negative cultural stereotyping of older professional single women.

**Male-dominated professional cultures.**

Two participants who ventured into male-dominated industries shared their stories of facing rules and behaviors expected in the world of work historically created by male professionals for male professionals. They did not choose traditionally “female” careers and had to grapple with simultaneously being females and acting “manly” in order to succeed in corporate cultures.

**Kris**, who became a lawyer, recalled:

My father’s law firm is one of the largest in his city. And there really weren’t women lawyers. I never met women lawyers. All the women I knew growing up were either mostly mothers or housewives, or secretaries, or teachers. … It wasn’t until I was out in the work force and realized, you know, I could be a professional woman. I also realized I wasn’t going to get married, probably, and I wanted to be able to support myself better and that I would be a good lawyer. But being an older woman… I think it’s very hard for an older lawyer and a woman to get a job in a prestigious law firm. … The practice of law is very traditional.

**Kris** bitterly talked about a “pyramid scheme” that exploits associates and expects “really young malleable people” to give up their personal lives and work 60-70 hours a week. She cried when she talked about being “disowned” by her father when he learned about her decision to become a lawyer:

Women weren’t allowed into Harvard until what? ’69, ’70? I mean, people forget women even weren’t allowed into certain prestigious law schools. But even by the
time I was in law school, graduating in 1988, almost half of the class was women. … But doing law school is a different game than getting out, because the law firms, all you have to do is look at the photos. The law firms are still, I don’t know what percent, huge percentage male partnership. … It’s a power network. You know, they all go to the same clubs that women weren’t allowed to go to. It’s all very white, male-dominated kind of process, and I knew that because I grew up with that. … I think my father’s philosophy was echoed by a lot of older men in law practices, which was: You needed to give 110 percent to be successful in their profession, right? And women couldn’t do that because women should be married. Got married and had kids. And you could not balance a family and a professional life. … There is the no-win situation. You can’t be a real woman according to this philosophy unless you are married and have kids. So what’s your choice? You can be not a real woman. Then you can practice law.

*Kris* shared that she refused to relinquish her “female” identity and has become active in voicing the need for change in her profession toward women. She passionately stated:

I absolutely don’t agree with that. … My hope is… I see it is happening more… women come out of law school 50 percent now, right? What has to change is this attitude within the profession. It’s changing the expectations of the profession. To accommodate women like real life more. For men, the structure they have created and the male practice they created… for them it was working because they can come to the office on Saturdays and Sundays… but there is no “mommy” track in most law firms. … It’s one of those bellwether professions that I think women can impact, but it’s difficult.
Toni, who worked as a computer engineer for a major U.S. corporation, described very similar pressure to be less “feminine” in order to fit in better and to become more respectable and less threatening to her male coworkers. For Toni, however, it came more easily due to her personal inclinations:

The whole preponderance of worrying about: How do I look? … No, it’s just something that I’ve sort of been this way for as long as I can remember, you know. … I’ve always put a whole lot more emphasis on my brain than I have on the way I look… and that’s why in my previous career I did as well as I did. More often than not I was the only one woman in the room for the last 20 years, and if I tried to be pretty and cute and so forth, you know, I would not have been taken seriously. It’s the women who did not wear makeup, who did not try to get all dolled up, that got taken seriously.

Toni shared that being a single woman in her profession was beneficial for high-powered advancement:

I think in some ways there is less pressure professionally to be married than for men. One of the biggest reasons that I left probably the most important job I ever took was because they found that I had gotten married and so they did not promote me. You know, that was a pattern that the corporation had because like: Oh well, you are going to have kids in the next year and a half and they you’ll be gone so why should we put you in a position of more responsibility? And if you are not married, that’s not the issue. …So my experience in my previous career in engineering was, first off, very few women to start with, so just because I was female, I could make people uncomfortable. And secondly, out of all the senior
executives that I knew that were female, out of probably only the dozen or so, only
one of them was married with kids. All the rest of them were single. … Being
married meant that you probably weren’t going to get promoted. …And in
engineering, quite frankly, most of the guys didn’t talk about their personal lives
anyways. They rather talk about computers.

*Single women growing older in the culture of youth: resisting the influence or masking aging.*

The participants were vocal in criticizing the cultural ideal of youth and promoted
by media societal values of sexiness associated with youth.

*Mary* pondered:

I think definitely we live in a culture… where for any sign of aging … you should
have facelifts and anti-wrinkle cream. And heaven forbid you should have gray
hair. It’s like this focus on youth is just ridiculous. People in the media and
television and entertainment industry… we live in the youth-focused society. How
do we get beyond? It just kills me when I see a strong woman, who I consider a
strong woman, who then it feels like knuckles under to the standard visions of
beauty.

*Sp.* confirmed:

We live in a culture that really is impressed and considers youth valid and not
aging valid. “Valid” means useful or influential… it’s really a paradox in a sense
because the people that we have, especially us artists, that have aged, have so
much to offer, but the way the culture is going right now, our values are shifting
and my values aren’t relevant now.
Dora thought the culture was failing in modeling graceful aging, “I am really conscious that my culture and my community are not teaching me how to grow old gracefully. I think that has to be taught, a lesson to model.”

Toni pointed out that promoting young sexy looking women by media has to do with American culture being competitive and male-oriented:

I personally think that a lot of it is the image that men have of younger women, because if you are brought up to perceive that having the younger woman means the end of all existence, then that’s what everybody, all the women are going to try to be in order to get a man, to fit socially. …We have got these ads where we worship being skinny, we worship being perfect, and we are worshipping what you look like instead of who you are. That’s why I look and say: You know, the culture that I live in doesn’t have it right. The other cultures that I have seen do a much better job of it.

Kris appreciated the fact that she was no longer in a race to get male attention:

There is a lot of pressure to be attractive to men and dating…. But it is so nice to be in my age group where I don’t have to deal with that aspect so much. …I like being the older woman sometimes with younger women and not being in that competitive mode that you are when you are younger with women your own age.

Mary, who identified as a lesbian, agreed with Kris that aging allowed her to step out of “the game”:

In the lesbian culture now women wear makeup and some women high heels, and others don’t… But for me, it was very freeing because I could get rid of that piece.
I don’t have to worry about that, so much emphasis on looks, although there is definitely looks-ism in the lesbian culture.

Di, who is morbidly obese, highlighted that she felt pressured to be skinny to conform to the image of youth: “I have a huge weight problem and I would say that is more of a stigma and more of an influence on my aging.”

And while all the participants condemned the messages to mask aging and try to look younger, they had a different take on dealing with gray hair that they perceived as an undeniable sign of aging.

Toni shared that she was proud of her gray hair but when she went a college reunion, she made a decision to color it. She was still conflicted about her decision:

I have to admit, as far as appearance and so forth, … yes, I did go to Gene Juarez and blow a wad and had fabulously non-gray hair. But there is a part of me that actually kind of likes gray hair. I am actually really proud of them in a lot of ways because I earned every last one of these gray hairs. … Denial of aging. It is so much of the social pressure. You see the amount of money that women spend on hair products alone. It’s just really sort of: Where do I want to put my time and energy?

Di, Dora, Donna, and Kris, on the other hand, thought that having blond hair or less gray hair helped them look younger and deceive people when they guessed their age. Di said, “I don’t worry. My hair is highlighted with gray. It doesn’t look all that gray until you look at certain mirrors. Most people don’t think I am as old as I am.”
Kris laughed, “I am fortunate that my hair is blond and people always think that I am younger.” Donna mentioned that she would continue coloring her hair because it helped her look younger and attract younger lovers.

Sp., Irene, Sage, and Sue stated that they have accepted the natural changes in their appearance and did not focus much on masking signs of aging. They emphasized that it was more important to strengthen mental and physical functioning than invest money and time into passing for younger women.

_I am not a crazy old maid! Societal stereotyping of single older women and internalized ageism._

In discussions about aging in the culture of youth, the participants asserted that they had to deal with the negative stereotyping of single, older women on a daily basis. They talked about resisting prescribed behaviors for older single women, about becoming “invisible” and protested against being perceived as an isolated “crazy old maid.” In many ways, however, the participants exhibited internalized ageism when they tried to distance themselves from “other old people”.

Sp. stated:

People expect me to be excited about doing old peoples’ stuff. I am not interested in that kind of stuff. I am not interested in going to a senior lunch. I am not interested in things that are categorically done by older people. … When people think of me as an aging person, their first judgment of me is: “Oh, you must think within this box. … Somebody asked me: “Well, are you subscribing to AARP magazine?” And I am saying, “There is nothing in AARP magazine that I find important for my life right now.”
Di echoed Sp.:

I think about men and women sitting on the front porch drinking lemonade and watching grandchildren play and that’s like “Well, that ain’t going to happen.” Or I think the ladies in the little nursing home all getting together and knitting. Considering I flunked knitting, that’s not going to happen.

Women talked about losing sexual value and becoming “invisible” as they age. Sp. shared:

I became less and less valid entity in social situations. … It really is like slowly disappearing, and recognizing that I could walk through group situations and be completely unacknowledged, and by what I was noticing in other middle-aged women was that they were experiencing that too. People are taking me much more for granted as being a part of the furniture in the room.” Sp. connected becoming “invisible” with losing male attention: “It’s not easy for me to attract a sexual partner.” But at the same time she firmly asserted, “I don’t want to be with an old man either! Who wants to date an older man… his body is disgusting. Sagging boobs, bear belly, sour breath…

Kris followed suit:

I have several friends who are saying: “I am invisible because I am an older woman and people don’t see me anymore”. Yes, men don’t see you that way anymore… as a sexual object… I did not usually date in my age group… I remember an old lover of mine came back to me a few years ago and I said: You are 70. You are old. Go back to your wife.
Donna echoed Kris and Sp. and lamented that men her age and older have aging bodies and less stamina to be good lovers.

Describing the socially constructed implied pathology that is associated with being an older single woman, Mary shared:

I fully accept that I am going to be the cat lady. And that’s perfectly fine with me. … But I get an underlying feeling from people… like somehow that’s wrong or there is a negative aspect to being single and older. … I think it’s just society’s expectations that you have to follow the certain path. There is still this expectation that you can’t be happy unless you are in a committed relationship. And I don’t know if that’s true. That’s what I think society tells us.

Toni supported Mary, “The stereotype is “you are too picky, why can’t you settle? … Nobody can possibly ever get along with you.”” And Mary added, “You know, you are going to be that crazy woman, mentally disturbed crazy old woman, there must be something wrong with you.”

Toni refuted:

People just don’t realize that just because you are not married doesn’t mean you don’t have friends, you don’t have family. … Doesn’t mean you live your life in isolation. … If you think that I am old… I am not sitting here. I am not just letting life pass by me and staying home and crocheting, which is a part of the vision of an old maid. You are sort of subservient to everybody else. And part of me says that calling somebody an old maid is your way of putting somebody down so that you feel better about yourself.

Toni succinctly described a societal stereotype of an old maid:
There was a deck of cards game called the Old Maid. The worst thing for you to be the old maid. It’s a translation for the little old woman who never got married, spinster. She lives by herself. Nobody wants to be with her. She is isolated.

*Kris* contributed:

I think that women who have always been married and would think: “Oh my God, there is nothing worse than being single and older.” And I would like them to understand that it’s not bad at all. There is a lot of really cool positive stuff, and I would like to get that aging old maid thing out of people’s heads. … that poor old aunt with no money and nobody to take care of her.

*Contrasting aging in the culture of youth with aging in other cultures.*

It was obvious that the participants, single, highly educated, professional, ambitious, and insightful women, were well aware of the differences in attitudes toward older people in other cultures.

*Dora* said, “I know that other cultures have great wisdom about aging. Native Americans… acknowledge age.” *Sage* and *Donna* also talked about native cultures that respect older people.

*Toni* shared her impression about the way older people were treated in Europe and Africa:

Going to Europe… older women are appreciated just as much as younger women, and they are recognized for being different, and there isn’t the pressure to get the Botox and the facelifts and everything else. … And it’s because having a young woman is not presented as being the ultimate prize from a male perspective. … When I was in Africa, going to a museum, and the images of beauty were women who had saggy breasts and who were kind of big and chunky. And it’s clear that
they were older, and that was perceived as being beautiful. And I thought: Yes. So it’s embraced there. … Asia, elder – you know, seniority is definitely embraced in Asia. We are one of the big areas where that’s not the case, where youth is considered better than age. So it’s the shame.

_Differentiating and asserting the uniqueness of Baby Boom women and their aging._

When the participants were disputing societal stereotyping of older single women, they emphasized that their generation presented a challenge to traditional views on aging single because of its uniqueness and diversity.

_Sp._ pointed out:

I think it’s the first time in history that women really have that kind of empowerment, where they can make a choice to live alone, and there’s not such a huge stigma on it. … For women to be independent, living alone is a new category because most of the single professional women… are people who have been empowered by working. They have been empowered by being able to support themselves. They have been empowered by being smart enough to get a house that they can afford. … We are used to, you know, the generations before me were saying “Stay with your husband as long as you can because that’s your ticket to make sure that your kids are to grow up healthy and strong.” It’s not like that anymore. And we are modeling… I am modeling for my daughters a choice to be married, a choice to be living with somebody, or a choice to be single, a choice to have children and be single, a choice to be aging and single.
Di commented on the unusually large numbers of single women in society: “You know there are just so many older white females now who are single out there. I don’t think that there is a stigma about not being married or not being hooked up.”

Toni confirmed these changes:

The concept of having a single woman, you know, unmarried, was fairly rare, because you think about it, 30 years ago, you got out of high school, you got married. That was the standard pattern. That’s changed. And here we are the products of that changed time.

Kris noticed that Baby Boom women developed a sense of freedom: “I think we are different than our mothers and different from a lot of generations because we have had more freedom and we want to keep it.”

Mary expressed the hope that her generation might change stereotyping of older single women:

The population gets a little bit older, maybe that some of that stereotype will be challenged just by the reality that more of us are going to be older … women who are comfortable and successful, living their lives and traveling to other countries alone, and you know, doing the things they want to do … as Baby Boomer population ages, there will be more of us out there.

Drawing upon personal role models and positive cultural role models to learn how to age gracefully.

Dora, Toni, Irene, Sue, and Sage mentioned “aging gracefully” when they talked about the process of aging as something that has to be taught and modeled. The women shared many stories about the lives of single older women, family members and friends
whose examples they would like to follow. Some praised the characteristics of personal role models that included being physically active and independent, being involved in volunteer work and contributing to the community, mentoring younger people, having various interests, hobbies, and research projects, and maintaining an active lifestyle of traveling, learning new things, and establishing new friendships.

*Sue* shared:

I have many aunts and uncles. We’ve looked to them as mentors or people we could go to with issues, so it has given aging kind of a positive image at least for myself. Because I have watched them gracefully retire but find other activities in their lives and just their connection to all of us as they age, they are very respected in our family.

*Mary* talked about her mother as a role model of aging:

I think I have a really good role model. My mother is 80 and she is one of the most energetic people I have ever met. … Her life is full of everything she wants to do. She travels, she volunteers… she got a little bit of arthritis and needs to use hearing aid now… but she is going into her 80s full of life and that’s sort of what I hope to do.

*Irene* held her parents as a role model of aging:

I find from my parents that … aging will be graceful and joyful. My parents are very physically active. That’s kind of expectations I have for myself, that I’ll always be able to take a walk every day. They are very much independent and expect to remain so, and so do I for my own aging.
Donna, Kris, and Toni talked about older female friends whom they admired for their independence, perseverance, sense of humor, and an ability to see positive things in life while accepting the limitations of aging body. For Dora, learning to die was another essential part of aging: “I have had a very strong model in my mother of how not only to grow old graciously but how to die graciously.”

When it came to positive role models of aging in media, Sp. reflected on changes that initiated the process of normalization of the images of older women:

The thing that is cool is we are seeing more ads of women in their 50’s in commercials and magazines. They are still gorgeous, thin 50-years olds, but it is a beginning of what I think will happen 20 years from now. We will see people that are in this kind of place in a more normal way. It’s like we are making gays normal now on TV. It’s just a matter of time. … I think we need to identify this particular category of people.

Toni supported Sp.:

When you look at the Vogue pattern books, there is a section called the Vogue Woman. And the models are, God bless them, they are in their 50’s and 60’s. Some of them have gray hair. They have bigger bodies and so forth. Good.

Women get to see that.”

Toni talked about movies and TV shows in which French actresses portrayed “… not crazy, but eccentric aunt who is 70 and still sexy and still can get men to chase after her. … Women are still alluring even though they are older. … We are starting to get a few exposures to women who are professionals who are not 20 and chasing men, you know. And that’s just really nice to see.”
Talking about highly visible older women in the society, seven out of ten participants mentioned Madeleine Albright and Hillary Clinton as their role models. 

*Toni* shared:

I am actually happy to see Hillary [Clinton] running for president. She is such a polarizing figure, and I am sure that we all know there are people who hate Hillary irrationally, and I am sure it’s for exactly these reasons. Who wants to see a successful, attractive, older woman, right?

This very question, asked by *Toni*, propelled the researcher to go back to the participants to further investigate how they perceived the issue of power, politics, and societal reactions to older professional women attempting to gain political power and recognition.

*Kris* passionately challenged assumptions about an older women’s apolitical stance:

We realize the power that we have and need to use it, you know, like Madeleine Albright. I mean, to be more political, to say, you know: I can be an older woman with power and authority just like older men have had power and authority.

*Constructing an ideal model of aging.*

The participants were asked to describe an ideal model of aging that would meet their needs as they age. Five different types of ideal aging emerged from women’s narratives: a family-oriented, multigenerational model, a community-oriented or cohousing model, an assisted living model, a model of a peer-oriented retirement community, and a model of remaining in the workforce until the end of life.

*Mary, Donna, Sp.,* and *Sue* deviated toward a family-oriented model of living with siblings, nieces and nephews. *Sue* shared that such a model was traditional in her
family: “One of the factors in our family is there has been a lot of family care-taking, a lot of family members sharing housing together, brothers and sisters, and so on, and caring for older family members, so it’s kind of tradition, and I know that my younger nieces and nephews all talk about it even now. They see that as part of the strength of our family.”

Mary stated that she has been already making plans for her retirement:

My sister has talked about moving me into her house on their property, and so I have family who probably are more willing to take me in than a lot of children would be. So I think that sort of is my safety net.

For Mary, family support extended into carrying out her wishes when it comes to dying:

“I know if I have something really serious, like an illness, I don’t want to suffer. … I’ve talked to my niece about it. We talked. She knows that I would like to just go and it’s okay to let me go.”

Sp. who has two adult daughters living nearby described the most desirable for her model of aging:

Like the mother is living there in the house somewhere, in a room somewhere in the house, and that she has children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren around her. The societies that do that… they have something really special going on because then nothing changes much. You have your room or your space and you have a routine and it’s just – it feels safe because there is the rhythm to life.

Irene said that she was really fascinated by an idea of co-housing:

What I would like to see? Every soul was introduced to the model of co-housing as a living circumstance where people of several generations and economic and social diversity are living in an environment with a certain amount of shared resources
and shared meals and shared decision-making. That would work well, I expect, for an aging population, that there will be stimulation, that’s the word – of younger people in that environment through all parts of your day, and the support of those people, should you need physical help or simple mobility issues, perhaps, not long-term care necessarily, but physical issues. And that is neither a government program nor a social agency. That’s a community decision entered into by members of the community. And that’s outside of a church community. That’s more of a small town within a large town social network. … And it also would keep me interested in other people as well as them in me. … I would be more easily able to offer support because you would be aware when someone had a need of something.

*Dora* and *Sage* were content with transitioning to an assisted living facility at some point in the future. *Dora* stated: “Having my own house means a lot to me… and being able to travel and to learn, to take classes. To earn more financial stability… but whenever I would be physically ill, I will be in assisted care.”

*Sage* also planned on remaining in her house as long as possible and then moving into an assisted living facility:

I thought about researching good assisted living housing in Canada and looking for an establishment with a good reputation. … I probably will have to travel some and check many facilities and have a place picked in the future.

*Toni* was attracted to an idea of gathering her friends together in one place when they retire:
An ideal model to me would be, you know, if I had my close friends in the same retirement home. That would be tremendously wonderful because here we are, we can still relate to each other and there is still a lot of wonderful interactivity. … It’s like being in the college dorms again for general silliness and fun level … it’s sort of like being in college at the age of 70. … Interestingly, when I look at my best friends from college, out of the eight of us, only two folks have had kids … this part of us going, you know, we should get in a retirement community together. It would be great you could have people that you could really still have wonderful relationships with that bring meaning to your life as you get older.

For **Toni**, just like for **Mary**, it was important to execute control over the decision to end her life:

For me, part of the optimal course of aging is an understanding when it’s okay to let go. So part of it would be having a medical staff who understands. … Give me the palliative care so I’m not in pain. Let me go. I would not want to commit – do assisted suicide either, but again, it’s okay to let go, folks.

**Kris** offered a similar model:

I am in an investment group that’s all women and I’ve been in it 20 years and it’s mostly women artists and stuff, and we’ve always joking about doing a retirement community that’s just for hip old women because we don’t want to be, you know, traditionally shoved aside.” However, an ideal model of aging for Kris included work as an essential part of maintaining well-being: “I would continue being informed and still making an impact. I mean, clearly, Madeline Albright could retire. I don’t want to retire. That’s one thing I like about the legal profession. I
think it’s something you can do until you die. You know, whether you are doing it and making money or you are doing it and, you know, sharing these ideas with others in another format, or whatever have you, you are practicing that thing. I have a real interest in continuing to work and understand problems and try and come up with solutions.

Di also insisted that she would keep working:

I have always decided that I would be dead by the time I was 70. … I don’t want to stop. I’ll probably be one of those people that work until I die. I just keep working and working and working until I die. You know, my mother worked until she – well, my mother worked until she threw herself into a coma and got cancer. … My father, I think, was pretty much the same. In our family you just work till you die, so that’s probably my – the model I want too. … No, I don’t see anything else, I just keep moving forward. What’s the next thing I want to do? I am not the retiring kind of person. … I guess I think of myself as the old professor type. You know, the professor that just keeps teaching, teaching this or teaching that. You know, and then going back to their house and smoking their pipe and having a martini or whatever. And I guess that’s probably more me.

Coming up with strategies to age gracefully.

The participants were asked to reflect on strategies they employed to achieve the goal of thriving and aging gracefully. An analysis of their strategies produced three large groups of specific resources, actions, plans, and goals situated in the personal context of their lives, in the social environment, and extending to the culture. On the individual level, the strategies grouped around improving or maintaining health including physical,
cognitive, and emotional functioning and ensuring financial security and safety in the future.

On the social level, the strategies revolved around creating new and/or strengthening already existing support systems and implementing conscious geographical planning of the residence for retiring. And finally, on the cultural level, the participants’ strategies had to deal with breaking stereotypes related to the sexuality of single older women, establishing the normalcy of aging as a single professional woman, and challenging the culture to find a new category, a name to identify the social phenomenon of aging as a single, professional, highly educated, Baby Boom woman.

Strategies on the individual level.

All of the participants rated taking better care of their health as the number one priority in the effort to remain independent and enjoy the same quality of life for years to come.

Irene turned to alternative medicine and practices to maintain health:

The media messages one gets about all the advertising, about joint problems and cholesterol and diabetes things you should worry about as effects of aging. I prefer to look at those messages and choose to approach them differently. … Natural health issues – remedies, and avoid doing pharmaceutical kinds of things will keep me active for longer. And to use yoga … to deal more directly with physical aging issues. … And the first thing that has to be revised and given some serious attention and some real discipline and commitment for the long haul… start walking.
Sp. joined in: “Exercise. I plan to exercise. I plan to walk every day. I plan to eat less. I plan to like go to the dentist and the eye doctor and just maintain myself.”

Di firmly stated:

Get healthy, finally. I have got to get healthy. Actually start taking care of myself. You know, lose some of the weight. I see a lot of people around me coming down with diabetes or lost a friend to breast cancer this year, which kind of frightens me, so I guess that would be the big thing, is start looking after my health. The weight issue … that’s going to deteriorate me faster if I don’t do something about it, so I guess that’s where the aging piece happens. It’s: Take care of it now or never.

Toni talked about finding her “inner gym rat”:

I have this sort of pact with my body: Okay, you are going to do strange things to me and I will take care of you the best that I can and that’s going to keep going on for however many years.

Staying mentally active by learning new things was another strategy to which the participants paid a great deal of attention. Sp. shared:

I am always looking beyond parameters … I mean, I want to embrace whatever catches my interest. … There will always be new – there will always be the next thing to learn. There will always be the next thing that my interest will move toward. And I plan to be kind of, you know, keep my mind fertile.

Toni, Sue, Irene, Dora, Sage, Mary, and Donna emphasized learning as a way to keep the mind sharp and engaged and ultimately, as a way to prolong life.

Toni said:
There’s all sort of things you can do to keep your brain going and if your body decides it’s tired. And it goes back, to me, to this state of staying young mentally to me is a lot more… it is more important than staying young physically, because if you stay young mentally, I think that’ll keep me alive longer.

Di echoed: “Always looking forward to the next thing. What is it I haven’t read yet, what is it I haven’t done yet. Um, I will be probably one of those people that take all the classes they can take.”

The participants chose different ways to ensure financial safety and security while aging. Sp. started planning her retirement about 10 years ago, counting on Social Security benefits and being able to afford housing:

My plan is to somehow make sure nothing changes much, so I specifically bought this house because it’s subsidized, and if I wasn’t making as much as I am right now, I would be paying a percentage of the mortgage as opposed to the full mortgage which is what I am doing now. So I am imagining being on Social Security and having my mortgage down.

Di was confident that she did not have to plan anything but keep working:

I haven’t prepared diddely squat. I have no retirement. I have no worry about it. I just assume that I am going to die working, so I don’t think about anything past that 20 years.

Sue considered financial planning a serious task and wanted to ease into retirement gradually:

The other aspect is financial planning, you know. I can coordinate; have resources to retire when I want to. Um, I would like to kind of phase my way out, kind of
work part time and make a transition that way so the other part of my life will be sort of reestablishing, and not all at once, just kind of part of it at a time.

Mary recently went back to school to change careers and was counting on the new career to take off and to provide an opportunity to retire:

I have been saving money for some time now but with school loans I don’t see myself… I don’t think I will be having enough to retire any time soon. I will probably be working well in my 70s and hopefully making enough money to pay off my loans. You know… I hope my education will pay off in the future.

Toni was proud of her financial planning:

The finances are huge. … You have to – finances in this country - especially because we don’t have a safety net for health care and everything else - you got to think about the money. You know, we don’t live in a society that has pensions anymore. So that’s really a very tactical thing to think about. I’ve been saving since I was 21 years old. So I actually have got a pretty good war chest already socked away.

Donna hoped that her real estate properties would be a sufficient safety net for retirement. Kris, Sage, and Irene approximated the time they have to work until they might retire comfortably as being anywhere from ten to fifteen years.

There was a common theme, however, for all the participants when they talked about financial planning. It was a conscious strategy of frugal living, downsizing expenses, and re-evaluating material needs.

Sp. pointed out:
I am being able to live very frugally and, you know, I get to have all my stuff around me, but my needs are just paring away, so I am living very cheaply. … I am not doing things conventionally, like socking away money in a 401(k) or get the IRA set up. I mean, I am not doing it financially that way. But I am realistic about how I am going to have to simplify everything.

*Dora* echoed *Sp.*, “I don’t have to own things or have them in my apartment. I can see beautiful things and not own them.”

*Toni* criticized consumerism in American culture:

Um, I don’t own a plasma screen TV. I don’t own a PDA. As I said, no designer clothing. There are so many things that people in this society use to divert their attention from what happens in their lives. And I look and sort of go: “Okay, I don’t need a big screen plasma TV to show that I have a fabulous ego. …”. That’s several thousand dollars I may need later on when I am, you know, 90-something. And for me, it’s not particularly a great sacrifice to not have to have the latest, the greatest, the biggest, the fastest whatever. That’s an element of American consumerism that I fortunately bought out of when I turned 35, and I am grateful for that.

*Strategies on the social level.*

To further refute the societal stereotyping of older, single women as isolated “old maids” and to balance the lack of traditional supports associated with marriage and/or having adult children, the participants shared an array of strategies they used to create or strengthen family ties, friendships, professional and spiritual networks and communities, and to breach generational barriers.
Irene shared that she counted on a rural religious community to step up if she needed help:

I participate in an Episcopal church. I am a musician there. It is very much a family situation for me because my family is very distant physically. … And it is – because it’s a small group of people, we do rely on one another for support in challenging circumstances like a family. … And we rotate that responsibility so no one’s getting burned out about it. If there were, as part of aging, a medical crisis, say I broke my hip, there certainly would be people who would rally around me to make sure I had meals brought to me or I would have help with housekeeping should I need it for a period of time.

Sp., who resided in a rural area, also believes that an investment in local community will ensure care giving and support in the future:

As long as I am a part of the community and that I have people around me that care about me and that I care about, the support will be there. I feel like I am very much an active part of this community and I don’t think that people, old people, get in trouble unless they are isolated. And in this community there is a lot of support, there’s a lot of people that are – that out of the goodness of their heart are… and a lot of people my age … and I think that we are influencing the next generation down to really kind of check out what is going on with people. It’s really hard to be isolated here. I mean, people get discovered, basically. And I think that as long as I trust that I will be discovered, my community will have a stake in my well being, because I have a stake in its well being, and I think this is give and take kind of thing.
**Dora** talked about her plan to join a group of older women to have a sense of belonging and support:

> There is one group that’s not in this area called Crones, the Crone Group. And that’s where, my understanding is, when you are post menopausal and you are very wise and mature people, women get together and share their wisdom and share their support of someone, … not necessarily single, but that state of being of age.

**Sue** planned on relocating and building new relationships while maintaining established friendships:

> Your friendships mature and you end up with a network of friends that can be a support or play a different role in your personal life. I have liked my network of friends and professional contacts and it’s just kept me feeling connected to things. One of the hard things would be … severing of ties geographically. … That will mean new relationships to build. So I will be off on building new relationships. I just am not sure they will be of the same depth that I have now. I may have some separation issues to deal with.

**Di** had an opposite take on having the need for support:

> Again, I am kind of a loner, so I don’t have a huge support system. I’ve never really needed a huge support system. I have a few friends, from college, that we are still real close to each other. And J., as long as he stays alive. … Yeah, that’s about it.

**Toni**, however, emphasized that she has been diligently working on developing many friendships: “I put a lot of work into maintaining a friendship with a lot of different
people, you know. … I know they are people who will be in my life for the rest of my life.”

**Donna** reflected on changes she’s made in her relationships with relatives:

Over the years I’ve become close with my sister and her kids. I have been really active in their lives lately… I know that they reciprocate… so yes, that’s my plan and my support system, to be close to them and relocate to their state eventually.

Three participants, **Sp.**, **Donna**, and **Kris**, shared that they have thought a lot about breaching gaps between generations and ensuring that they have friends outside the circle of their contemporaries.

**Sp.** pointed out:

I am way more interested in hanging out with a bunch of teenagers and finding out what they are doing. … Just looking at things from a new perspective, you know. … My guess is, that I am going to live to a really old age and I’ll be like the last person standing. This is what I think about. I go: “My God, what if I live until I’m like 92” – my father is 91 now – “and I am like the last person standing?” And so I think about nurturing friendships with younger people.

**Donna** echoed:

I want to play with different generations. I am equally excited and happy to go out for drinks with my 25-year old assistant and to spend an evening with M. who is 87 years old and is terrific. I want to have younger women friends and act a little crazy and wild with them. Even when I am 87 years old. And some of those young women, you know, they can teach me a lot of things because they are very wise.

**Kris** added:
I have developed, over the last 15 to 20 years, several close professional friendships with guys who are younger than I. I talk to one of them every day and it’s an important connection to me emotionally. … I have developed some younger friends and I think that’s, you know, it’s important from a lot of reasons. … You tend to hang out with people, any time in your life, with people who have the same age group, same thoughts, same, you know, political preferences to a large extent. Since I work, you know, I work with a lot of people who are not like that, so I have that exposure and I meet younger people through my work… and it gets you out of your commonality of thinking.

The participants discussed their desire to exercise control over their choice of the best geographical place to age and to retire. Some of the participants talked about moving across the country to be closer to relatives and some of them asserted that the Pacific Northwest, in their experience, was the most suitable place for older single women.

*Sp.*, *Dora*, and *Sage* were very fond of the rural area where they resided.

*Sp.* shared:

In order to live with my values … which is part of the reason I live in this community, is because I have my values acknowledged, whereas if I was living in a more urban – yeah, urban situation, I would have to put a lot of my values aside and adapt to the values of a youthful culture. I’d rather live here and be free to express myself even if I have to simplify my life than live in the city.

*Dora* supported *Sp.:

Well, what I have found about living here, having come from [another Northwest city], just this place itself has a healing property… And the community here where
people basically look out for me, and there is a need to help or something… people generally care here, in the groups I am in. So this is a deterrent about moving off of it.

**Toni**, having moved all over the country, pointed out the difference between expectations and societal pressures on older single women in the East Coast and West Coast:

If you live in the East Coast there is culturally much more pressure to conform. …

I moved to the Pacific Northwest area in 1999. I would not want to move back to the East Coast at all because I see that so clearly and it makes it that much easier for me to buck the greater social pressures that you see on TV or fashion – women’s magazines. … No, I don’t want to move back to the East Coast because I know I am not going to be happy with who I am. Or, rather, other people will not let me be happy with who I am. So this place is more acceptable … how they perceive women and how they perceive society and media images in general.

That’s a big one.

*Strategies on the cultural level.*

Although there was substantial diversity of opinions among the participants about sexuality in older age, three participants, **Sp.**, **Toni**, and **Kris**, challenged the stereotype of an older single woman as asexual or possessing lesser sexual value and asserted that there was a new stereotype “coming up” that was making it culturally acceptable for Baby Boom women to openly relish their sexuality and to even normalize the dating of younger men.

**Sp.** commented:
If I met somebody 20 years younger, maybe that would be cool, because that’s what I remember about a sexual experience. With somebody that’s healthy and vigorous, you know, that kind of thing. … So that’s a different way for a woman to be thinking, overtly thinking and be mainstreaming, you know. And I think that that’s the category that I fall in. That is what women are saying, basically. It’s like you know, it kind of makes sense to me that Demi Moore is with a guy that’s 20 years younger than she is. That makes total sense to me. Why would she want to be that gorgeous, in that great of a shape, and be with somebody her age? It makes sense to me that she would want to be with somebody as equally as physically together as she is.

*Kris* and *Toni* talked about “cougars”, or older women dating younger men.

*Toni* explained:

Women chasing younger men. Which part of me says, God bless Demi Moore for making it acceptable. … Okay, if there are all of these men our age who are chasing younger women and who are taking themselves out of the dating pool for women my age, what does that leave us to date? Younger men, right? That’s a new stereotype that’s starting to come up that wasn’t there ten years ago, but it’s starting to get there now. Again, largely due to Demi Moore saying: Oh, it’s okay to chase young men.

Throughout their narratives the participants asserted that being middle-aged and aging was overall a positive experience bringing a time of new freedom, adventure, and exploration. While the culture portrays the outlook of aging single as being bleak, the participants’ statements suggested otherwise. Resisting being stereotyped as “crazy old
maids,” the women talked about their willingness to do things that were not “age-appropriate” and daring to pursue new careers, broaden education and try new activities.

*Toni* stated:

> For me it’s not being afraid to do all sorts of stuff that most people sort of go: “Oh, can you do that?” Yes, yes, I can travel to India by myself and know that I will be okay. Yes, I can drastically change my career in the middle of my life and know that I will be okay.

*Mary* added, “I am recognizing and listening to my inner voice more and disregarding more and more the “shoulds” of what I should be doing because those are related to somebody else’s expectations, not my own.”

*Kris* laughed:

> I am an eccentric and I think that I help to dispel the stereotype of an “old maid” by acknowledging my sexuality and professional abilities. Once people get to know me even a little, I think that changes. I consciously try to dispel this myth by sharing my views … without coming across as an “old hippie.”

*Toni* went even further sharing that she has been educating people on the normalcy of aging as a single professional woman:

> My friends tend to be more educated, and I think because of that, there’s probably more acceptance of me. … I actively organize a lot of social activities and include both my married and single friends. And because I do that, they reciprocate. I’ve wondered if I only invited my single friends if I’d ever see my married friends again or not. When my married friends have parties, they know it’s okay to invite me by myself. They don’t have to match me up with somebody. We have to teach
people that it’s okay. … Yeah. Teach them by example. You know, if everybody gets together and we have a wonderful time, who cares what your marital status is? … Just enjoy yourself. … And I tell them that’s the whole issue of what makes you successful as a woman and how you define your sexuality and your femininity, and it’s not necessarily because you’ve had Botox or plastic surgery. It’s who you are that counts. And that’s a big shift that I want to happen… for this country in general.

The participants were in an agreement there was a need to identify and describe the richness, freedom, independence, choice, and maturity of aging as a professional single woman and to reframe aging as a time of the unfolding of new possibilities and the gaining of a new identity rather than prescribing to a culturally scripted understanding of aging as a time of loss and decline.

*Sage* pondered:

I think it’s time to find another category to identify women. We have to create a new category. Okay, there’s the young ingénue. There’s the marrying type. There’s the - you know, we don’t go from like the marrying age to a decrepit crone. I mean there’s somewhere in between where I am right now, and it needs to be defined and it needs to be validated and it needs to be supported.

*Sage* admitted that she was at a loss:

I am puzzled by this a bit. … Aging women that surround my mother, women I socialize with … they are not “old maids,” “crazy,” “cat ladies” … I think naming myself or others is up to the small minded who have to categorize others to protect their fragile place in society. … Crone is OK but I simply don’t adopt a name for
myself. I think the word does not imply the power and dignity that I envision older women possessing. But I cannot think of a better word.

Mary, on the other hand, preferred “crone” as a name for an older woman:

I have a name that I really like. I like the term “crone.” I really have always liked that idea of a wise older woman who has been through her struggles in life and has come through it wiser, with a deeper understanding, who can offer wisdom and mentoring to younger people.

Toni suggested:

The name? I am fabulous. Probably “Goddess of Independence”. You know? I like that because, you know, it implies powerfulness, it implies self-determination, and it also implies femininity. Crone doesn’t do that for me.

The aspect of the special, unique power of an older single woman repeatedly echoed in the participants’ voices and in assertive statements about their identities and their role models of aging thus warranting in-depth exploration to better understand this concept.

Defining the power of an older, single, professional woman in society.

When the participants were asked to define the power of an older, single, professional woman in society, they provided narratives that were full of insight, knowledge and deep analysis and demonstrated exceptional skills of critical thinking applied to the issues of gender inequality, ageism, and the necessity of cultural and political change.

Mary said:
The power of an older woman. ... It’s a – it’s a gentle power. It’s not an in-your-face, you know: “I am powerful and here I am.” It’s self-knowledge and wisdom – and the desire or the capacity to pass on some of that wisdom so that other people don’t have to maybe go through exactly the same struggles, but can benefit from her experiences. … It’s more low-key and laid back.

*Toni* distinguished between internal and external power:

I don’t think you can really understand how to be a powerful woman unless you are older. I think it’s internal as opposed to external power. Because we think of external power and how you run corporations and, you know, a show of bravado and that sort of things, whereas when I think about the power that I have. … my power comes from knowing who I am. And there are a lot of men out there who are very powerful and have no clue who they are. I don’t think that power necessarily means political power or physical power. The power to live the life that you would like to lead as opposed to the one that’s necessarily prescribed to you. That much power, that’s much harder than, you know, picking up the standard rules and going by them, being successful. Figuring out what your own rules set is, is not easy. … The definition of success for the older woman, for me, it would be self-assurance, self-reliance, sense of humor. … And understanding and being comfortable with my own strengths and my own limitations, that’s very powerful, because there are a lot of people who are not comfortable with either one of those.
At the same time, the participants acknowledged that older women, being powerful because of personal growth and maturity, have not been able to achieve equality with men, when it comes to political power.

*Sage* wrote:

> Because women have not established a place of power yet in the political arena, especially single women. Why? The biggest stumbling block is probably financial. Old political families, like Kennedys for instance, did not groom their female children for political office. Preparing only sons for political office and using family wealth to ensure political success perpetuated the “old boys” political networks which loathe the thought of the powerful woman. I believe that this thinking (only men are suited for political power) is very pervasive in the US and so deeply ingrained in our psyche that we are not even aware that we believe or think this way. I feel that an older woman is better suited for political office. They have a broader knowledge base; they have less family obligations; and are most likely well balanced emotionally. … Do older women have the skills – hell Yes!

But I wonder if we women are raised from birth to acquiesce to the male opinion and that it is so deeply rooted in our thinking that we a unprepared to “fight to the end” for our point of view as that young man was prepared to do. … You know, I think that women have the power to lead, but we do not lead in the same fashion as men lead. … There is something in society that keeps very many women, single or married, out of the political arena.

*Sage* continued to illustrate her point:
Look at the way the press portrays Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain as cold, aloof, uncaring. In our own country many powerful women are viewed as flawed in some manner – cold, bitchy, etc. – Nancy Pelosi, Hillary Clinton, Sandra Day O’Connor, Barbara Boxer, and poor Janet Reno, as single women, were often demeaned in the press. 54% of our voting population is female and we still have trouble voting women into office or insisting that women be respected and portrayed honestly. I wonder why that is?

**Kris** also spoke about ingrained stereotypes that place women below men:

Women in general, regardless of age, are viewed as inherently less powerful than men. This attitude will continue until women slowly (it seems) visibly advance in all professions. My generation grew up without women in the professions until later in the Baby Boom generation and still carries the idea that women do not possess the same skills as men needed to govern. Women need to be seen as successful in all the profession to a large extend, not just a small percentage of exceptional women. This is happening more slowly than expected by my generation of women. … This kind of change is always slow to occur and is less likely to happen in times of political turmoil and war when people seek comfort in stereotypical definitions.

**Kris** believed that older single women had advantages in effecting social life compared to older married women:

Older married women … are following a couple mode of retirement, perhaps more accommodating of their husbands. Because they are committed, because they are spending their energy and time taking care of their husbands or entertaining
them… the gifts they can bring to politics, they don’t. They keep it inward with the family and their spouses, and I think, you know, maybe single women will have more impact because we see that we have more opportunity to go out into the community and do it. I hope that aging women Baby Boomers will get more attention. Because these kinds of things are important, because they hopefully will influence the politics of how that group of the population is addressed.

Mary talked about the threat that older single professional women present to the patriarchal society:

We still live in a patriarchal culture that for men and for a lot of women, women are being seen as having authority and a strong voice, and having the ability to make their own choices is scary to people. I think people are frightened by the idea that women could be just as powerful, or even more powerful, and decisive, and valuable, and important in making decisions as men, because we are based on a patriarchal society. And like when women are in the upper echelons of business … it’s really hard for women to bring their own power and their voice and still make it, the employment work, so a lot of women sort of take on almost the persona of doing things the way the men do it, just because that’s the way they feel they’ll succeed. I think people are just so reactionary towards women in politics and, you know, if you do the same type of politicking that men do, you are seen as a ball buster or a bitch, but if you focus more on the relationships, which I think is just more natural for women, then you are seen sort of as a wimp and ineffectual.

Sue was conflicted:
Well, I have mixed feelings about the power of an older woman. One is I think that often by that point women are wiser and more patient. However, I think there are certain areas where women may not be as well accepted because they have been so traditionally male-oriented and it may be more challenging to get to that spot, to that position. But it also may be that women don’t want to be in the political arena. It’s stressful, takes a lot of money. … And this could be a time of your life that is of more enjoyment. You know you have a lot to offer; you may not want to.

Toni noted that the society is not ready to shift the power yet:

If you have a woman who is in politics, it means that the power has shifted. We think of power as being coarse and authoritarian, and who gets to control what. If women are traditionally more consensus-builders than men, rather than having somebody say: “I am the decider,” a la George Bush, then what does it mean as far as how much authority you can control over a situation. It means the rules of the game have changed. And that’s why I think there’s gender conflict in older generation.

Toni continued:

There is this fear if you are going to be in politics, you need to be married, not just because of emotional support, but that way the voters will think you are stable. And when women run, they tend to be older to start with, and so they have got a slower start on having a political career, and I think that’s one of the reasons why there are fewer of them in the office. …Men traditionally have been able to rely a lot more on the network that they developed in college, on the sports field, in business, and so forth. Women haven’t had the historical amount of time to have
that network because there just haven’t been that many professional women to develop it or the organizations to develop it. And that’s just coming up now with our generation.

In this section the researcher presented common themes organized in categories with sets of subcategories or properties “mined” from the participants’ narratives. The next level of conceptual analysis allowed the researcher to construct a model that unites these categories around the studied phenomenon of aging for a single, professional, highly educated Baby Boom woman.

The Conditional Model

The development of grounded theory resulted in constructing a conditional model that is presented in Figure 1 (p. 97). The conditional model was built in accordance with the grounded theory guidelines where theory describes the ways in which the explored central phenomenon is experienced in the specific contexts and conditions. The central core category, or phenomenon, in the conditional model is the meaning of aging constructed by the single, professional, highly educated Baby Boom women who participated in the study and includes attitudes toward their own aging among the participants. The central phenomenon is also influenced by the individual experiences of aging by the participants. In the model, the contexts and conditions are located on the left side of the central phenomenon. The individual influences are located on the right side of the central phenomenon.

The strategies the participants employed to deal with aging in those contexts and conditions generate changes and new discourse in the way the phenomenon of aging as a single, professional, highly educated Baby Boom woman is constructed in larger social
and cultural contexts. The consequences of implementing these strategies, according to analysis of the data, signify the beginning of new cultural processes that include a process of creating a new, emerging identity for aging Baby Boom women, a process of asserting the political power of older, professional, highly educated single Baby Boom women who will soon begin retiring in great numbers, and the beginning of the cultural shift in attitudes toward aging.

Figure 2 (p.98) unfolds individual variables that affect and influence the aging of the participants. These variables indicate the richness and diversity of the women’s personal experiences of aging although they share the same themes pertinent to every participant in the study. Women’s aging is the embodied experience and is directly influenced by living in the aging body. The participants’ attitudes toward their own aging are being formed by employing their spiritual and religious beliefs as coping mechanisms and their beliefs are a source of individual strength, and personal growth. The participants have entered middle age and are transitioning into an older age as single while simultaneously living lives as professional, highly educated women who are invested in their careers and education. And, finally, the participants formed the ideal models of aging that they try to pursue by implementing specific strategies.

In the model the studied phenomenon is experienced in the various social, cultural, economical, and political contexts which are presented in Figure 3 (p. 99). Women’s aging is taking place in the culture of youth and it is contrasted with the attitudes toward aging in other cultures. Women in the study represent the unique Baby Boom generation and they draw upon personal and media role models of aging to negotiate their new identities while growing older.
Figure 4 (p. 100) represents three large groups of strategies employed by the participants in the negotiation of their aging: strategies on an individual level, strategies on a social level, and strategies on a cultural level.

An analytic story describing the conditional model and comparing the findings of the study with current research is outlined in the Discussion section.
Figure 1

The Conditional Model of Aging as a Single Baby Boom Woman
Figure 2

*Individual Variables*

- Religion and Spirituality
  - Strength
  - Acceptance
  - Coping

- Aging Body
  - Sexual Needs
  - Internalized Ageism
  - Acceptance
  - Frustration

- Aging Single
  - Choice, Independence
  - Implied Pathology
  - Regrets

- Ideal Models of Aging
  - Co-housing
  - Peer-oriented Retirement
  - Work until the End
  - Assisted Living
  - Family-Oriented

- The Meaning of Aging
  - Denial of Aging
  - Choice, Freedom, Joy

*Variables*
Figure 3

*Contexts*

- **Culture of Youth**
  - Masking? Resisting?
  - Crazy Old Maid
  - Internalized Ageism
  - Denial of Aging
  - Male Oriented

- **Other Cultures**
  - Beauty of Aging
  - Respect

- **Baby Boomer Generation**
  - Freedom of Choice
  - Education and Work
  - Empowerment

- **Personal and Media Role Models**
  - Aging Gracefully
  - Normalcy of Aging
  - Active Lifestyle

- **The Meaning of Aging**
  - Denial of Aging
  - Choice, Freedom, Joy
Figure 4

Strategies

- Individual
  - Financial Planning
  - Learning
  - Emotional Health
  - Physical Health

- Social
  - Geographical Planning
  - Intergenerational Networks
  - Local & Religious Communities

- Cultural
  - Powerful Older Single Women
  - Normalcy of Aging Single
  - New Sexual Stereotype ‘Cougars’
  - Sexuality of Older Women

Family
Friends
Discussion

An Analytic Story of Aging as a Single, Professional, Highly Educated Baby Boom Woman.

This story discusses the phenomenon of growing older in various personal, social, economical, professional, political, and cultural contexts as it is experienced by the ten professional, highly educated, single women ages 47-59 who participated in the study, and it connects the findings of the study with research in critical feminist gerontology.

As with the participants in the Oberg and Tornstam (2001) study, the women in this study actively deny their aging and define themselves as being “not old” or “ageless.” They try to distance themselves from the collective negative stereotyping of aging because their personal experiences contradict the negative identity of old people, which is about loss, limitations, grief, and decline. However, by denying any possible affiliation with older people, the women deny the continuity of time that ensures the natural progression that occurs from middle age to older age. Their identities are frozen in time and little change is allowed in the projection of their future. For these women, acceptance of the identity of “old” starts around late 80s or early 90s and is met with resistance and with the explicit negative stereotyping related to poor health and the loss of independence. This phenomenon of being stuck in “limbo” between middle age and “really old age” was also noted by Ogle and Damhorst (2005) in their qualitative study which explored midlife transitions and body. Our culture prioritizes the masking, slowing and preventing of aging, thus failing to provide the visible images of gradually getting older to which the women could relate and mirror.
In their individual realities, however, the women in the study enjoy the new freedoms, choices, confidence, maturity, wisdom, and personal growth that they have earned over the years. The participants overwhelmingly defined growing older as a positive experience of becoming more in tune with inner selves. It is very clear that in the descriptions of their identities they shift attention from the external to the internal self (Ogle & Damhors, 2005).

Religious and Spiritual Beliefs

Critical research, for the most part, has largely ignored the role of religion and spirituality as a vehicle for the human spirit which is transformed with aging (Moody, 2008). The uniqueness of this qualitative study lies in the creation of the opportunity for a dialog in which the participants were able to reflect on their spirituality and religious beliefs as related to aging. According to the participants, the ageless spirit encompasses women’s true identity while the body decline is devalued and becomes unimportant. At this point the religious and spiritual beliefs of the participants serve as a source of strength and become coping mechanisms used to understand and accept the reality of aging and dying. Christianity and Buddhism, for the majority of women in the study, provide the language and concepts that are employed in making meaning out of aging and in supporting the dichotomy of the eternal mind (soul) and mortal body. However, one woman in the study who ascribes to atheistic beliefs resolves the existential issues around aging and death in a different way, by valuing the finality of her existence.

Living in Aging Body

And yet the first signs of aging come from the aging body and the embodied experience of getting older, which is perceived at first as unpleasant, frustrating,
surprising, and sometimes even terrifying. Calasanti (2008), a feminist researcher specializing in gerontology, succinctly stated,

“Old is in your mind,” they tell me; and some people are not “old” because “they still act young.” This latter stance, I have come to realize, reflects a deeper level of ageism, one less visible because it is so deeply entrenched. It includes “age-blindness” – the belief that “age doesn’t really matter, we should ignore age.” But age does matter: bodies do change, old age is a social location burdened with the stigma of marginal status, and accumulated experiences do make a difference. (p. 155)

Menopause, illnesses, and the physical limitations of aging bodies bring about profound changes in women’s abilities to function and these issues force the participants to focus on preserving or improving health rather than appearance. The existence of an aging body itself confronts the cultural denial of aging and signals one’s mortality. For the participants, the acceptance, adaptation, and adjustment to losing what previously seemed to be an unlimited supply of body reserves, requires conscious choices on an everyday basis and a realistic assessment of the current state of health and the inevitable physical decline.

The sexuality of the aging body is additional terrain for grappling with the disparity between the socially constructed stereotypes of older people as asexual and the actuality of sexual experiences of the participants. It is not surprising that only four of the ten participants talked about having sexual needs and sought ways to satisfy them and it is not surprising that the researcher herself overlooked exploring sexuality and aging at the
beginning of research until she discovered internalized ageism in her preconceptions of women’s aging.

Those who spoke up on this issue challenged the cultural stereotype of sexual decline in older women and presented the ways in which they satisfy their needs. The women in the study enjoy masturbation more so as they have gotten to know their bodies better over time. Finding that masturbation is more enjoyable with age is consistent with previous findings (Foerster, 2001). The participants are open to having intimate partners but are very selective in their dating choices and would rather remain alone than sacrifice their integrity. The similar theme of very selective dating was revealed in a large qualitative study on the dating preferences of women born between 1945 and 1960 (Levesque & Caron, 2004).

In another qualitative study executed by Vares, Potts, Gavey, and Grace (2007) 15 participants, all mature women in their 40s and 50s, also articulated the importance of having active and full of desires female sexuality in mid-later life thus opening up new spaces for normalizing sexuality over the lifespan.

Historically women who exhibited more sexual desire than their partners, especially post-menopausal women, were perceived as abnormal and pathological. Contemporary women have challenged the norms of older women’s sexuality. Unlike their mothers and grandmothers, Baby Boom women grew up during the time of the “sexual revolution”, the feminist movement, and the introduction of the birth control pill, which allowed a shift from the representation of young women as predominantly passive to sexually active and it subsequently created a need to consider safe sexual practices. Some of the participants of the study go even further in breaking the norms that prescribe
seeking mates in their age group or older by diverting their attention to vibrant, vigorous, and virile younger men (Levesque & Caron, 2004). It is notable that the participants who asserted that they are open to having sexual partners and to continuing dating have not mentioned implementing safe sexual practices although sexually transmitted diseases have been spreading widely among the older population which is indicative of the lack of awareness of this problem among older people (Gale, 2006).

_Aging Single_

The Baby Boom women in the study came from families where divorce was rare and being married was an ultimate goal signifying the end of passage for women. Homosexuality, failed marriages, and the focus on education and careers instead of marriage are some of the reasons the conventional script of growing older with a husband, children, and grandchildren has not been actualized in their lives. An important part of a single women’s process of aging, as was previously confirmed by Anderson and Stewart (1994), is overcoming regrets and mourning the absence of the experiences of married life and motherhood. This is an individual process which takes time and the participants of the study are in different stages of accepting singlehood and letting go of some of their dreams.

Single Baby Boom women in the study have to deal with the idea that being married and having children is a necessary part of being complete as a woman and that it is a requisite part of belonging to the traditionally oriented society. The implied pathology of singlehood manifests in feeling like an outsider when it comes to communicating with married people, in being negatively compared to “good siblings” who got married, and in a profound sense of a deficiency in the identity of an unmarried woman. However, the
women in the study dispute the construction of their identities as pathological (Sheeny, 1995) and assert that they value independence, choice, power, and the ability to be in charge of their lives.

The lack of traditional supports which include financial support, emotional support, and intimacy associated with marriage is fully acknowledged by the participants who create their own support systems and get to choose their own “family” among friends and some family members. The gifts of singlehood are many and they bring the new freedoms and opportunities to the participants. Single women are free to distribute their financial resources in any way they see fit, invest time in education and to change careers in mid-life. The time that would be otherwise spent in family activities is instead dedicated to developing professional projects, to exploring new hobbies, traveling, and to volunteering in the community. The findings of this study support the Levesque and Caron (2004) findings on dating among older women and suggest that older single women, in contrast to popular beliefs, are not desperate to get married. Ultimately, for the women in this study singlehood at this stage of life is a conscious choice and they find a deep meaning in having an impact on the world in ways that differ from their married counterparts.

Aging as a Professional Woman

The participants find significant satisfaction in being older professional women. They enjoy the seniority of their status, professional respect, opportunities for mentorship, and possessing valued expertise in their professional fields. For many women work became a basis for establishing friendships and networks. However, the older professional
women in the study who seek jobs and/or work in male-oriented industries face the realities of gender inequality and ageism.

Although Baby Boom women have been trying to change rules and behaviors in the work environment to accommodate female professionals for more than four decades, job discrimination that is based on gender and age is still a real issue and it is forcing women to make changes in the way they identify and present themselves at work. The single professional women in the study have to deal with the assigned identity of being “not a real woman” because they did not choose traditional female careers and are not married. They have to break into well-established male power networks, play by the “rules” created by men, acquire “masculine” qualities to better fit in and to advance their careers, and have to avoid acting “feminine” because they would be perceived as being weak and less competitive by male colleagues and superiors. At the same time, as stated one of the participants, the tipping point even in the traditionally male-oriented professions has been shifting as more professional women are choosing male-dominated careers and these women have begun voicing the necessity of the restructuring professional power networks in order to acknowledge and accommodate women.

Ideal Models of Aging

Mirroring the diversity of the women in the study, the ideal models of aging that are being pursued by the participants portray a mix of some traditional ways of aging among families, transitional models involving utilizing existing services and facilities for older people, the model of staying in the workforce until the end of life, and new emerging models that are peer-oriented or community-oriented and are designed to promote the formation of intergenerational connections.
The united theme for all the participants in thinking about their aging was creating an environment that would allow preserving their independence and active lifestyle with the unique balance of privacy and outside support as their aging progresses. Preserving their ability to make choices, staying healthy, and the careful, frugal disposal of resources were the main tasks for women in planning of their aging.

*Socio-cultural Contexts of Aging*

Woman’s aging is happening in the various socio-cultural contexts, which affect, shape, and challenge their attitudes toward their own aging. They age in a male-oriented culture that values youth and beauty. They are aware of other cultures where aging is experienced differently. The women in the study identified with the Baby Boom generation with its unique history and diversity. And, finally, the women in the study sought personal and media models of aging to negotiate a new emerging identity for older single professional woman.

The findings of this study confirm the findings of another small qualitative study that examined older women’s perceptions of natural and unnatural aging and their attitudes toward promoted by the media beauty interventions including surgeries, cosmetics, and non-surgical cosmetic procedures designed to mask aging (Clarke & Griffin, 2007). As with the 44 participants in Clarke & Griffin’s study, women in this study were divided in their level of acceptance of natural aging and proposed “graceful” aging as an alternative to the standards of youth and beauty imposed by culture. Although the women in this study asserted that they would not risk having surgeries or other intrusive methods to mask their aging, some are still in the process of deciding if they
should continue coloring gray hair which seems to be the first undeniable sign of aging, or accept having gray hair.

The question of denying aging by masking age-related changes in appearance or resisting the media messages to maintain youthful appearance by accepting some changes while maintaining proper health care is a complex one. It appears that this problem doesn’t have an immediate solution for the women in the study. Some of them enjoy passing for younger women and some of them celebrate wrinkles, gray hair, and changes in their bodies as signs of maturity and the accumulated years of an exciting life, full of challenges and transformations. However, the general response of the participants to the cultural pressures to preserve youthful looks for as long as possible, is to reject ageist norms of beauty and to gracefully accept the physical realities of aging.

The cultural standards of beauty represent male-oriented definitions of femininity and diminish the marketable value of women who become invisible as soon as they age (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). In the Ogle & Damhorst’s qualitative study, 20 middle-aged women gave broad insight into the ways they revised the meanings of self and the surrounding world as they became older. The findings of this study were similar to the findings of Ogle & Damhorst’ study. The participants, while recognizing the effect of the male-oriented societal stereotypes of youth and beauty on the ways other people perceive them in social and professional contexts, resist the cultural devaluation based on those stereotypes and assert the self-worth, freedom of choice, maturity, and wisdom that come with age.

The woman’s voices in this study are truly empowered by the notion that their self-worth is no longer defined by male responses to their appearances. The participants
emphasized once again the shift from external values to the internal growth and self-confidence. The participants of the study found support for their idea of a graceful aging and the beauty of older women when they referred to other cultures where older people are respected and valued, and old age is celebrated. Being older and looking different than younger people, in some cultures that do not embrace Western values does not signify the pathology of aging and dying that is implied in the cultural psyche of the West. In contrast, the old age in these cultures is seen as a positive, natural progression of the accumulation of life experience and wisdom (MacGregor, 2003).

The women in the study were quite clear about resisting the negative stereotyping of older single women and expressed strong emotions about the possibility of being identified as a “crazy old maid.” The process of distancing themselves from the identity they wished to avoid and the search for a new, unknown and unfamiliar social identity is called “identity management” (Ogle & Damhorst, 2005) and was presented in a number of strategies that women in the study employed to counteract the culturally constructed stereotype of an “old maid.” This stereotype restricts them to a narrow category of socially prescribed behaviors, feelings, and attitudes.

The participants supported their resistance to the identity of “old maid” by referring to the uniqueness of the Baby Boom generation and to the differences in the conditions and contexts of their development compared to women in previous generations. Although the women in the study were very diverse in their upbringing, professions, and lifestyles, they shared most of the cultural experiences that contributed to their accumulated sense of self. The participants in the study belong to a cohort of women for
whom resisting social injustices and devising revolutionary ways of succeeding in a male-oriented, traditional society, became the essential part of their everyday lives.

The participants described their independence, freedom, and their ability to make choices and take care of the financial aspects of life, the satisfaction with careers and the emphasis on education. They talked about creating strong friendships, networks, and integrating in local communities. They asserted that their experiences cannot be reconciled with the sociocultural perception of an aging single woman as isolated, “crazy,” pathological, poor, miserable, depressed, and lonely.

To further support their right to age gracefully, to enjoy life while embracing and accepting physical changes and continuing with an active lifestyle, the women in the study sought personal and media role models to draw upon their experiences. Women in the study wished to identify with single older women who are visible in the society and who challenged the ageist stereotypes.

The participants admire women who go against the mainstream expectations of older age and challenge existing oppressing realities. Among those role models are famous actresses, well known politicians, spiritual and religious leaders, and entrepreneurs who entered male-dominated professions, challenged the stereotypes of sexuality of older women, and asserted the political power of women. Women in the study voiced a strong need for having a more realistic image of older single women in the media and for an acceptance of positive role models portraying aging in a graceful way.

**Strategies**

The strategies that the participants of the study employed to negotiate their aging connect their personal, local worlds and larger social structures. The themes that are
weaving throughout their strategies mirror the themes that are prevalent in the formation of the identity of single, professional, highly educated Baby Boom women in the sample. These strategies reflect women’s striving for independence, an ability to make informed decisions, being proactive in planning financial future and forming support networks and connections. These strategies are grounded in women’s critical thinking and astute observations of the processes happening in the society and culture. Women in the study don’t passively wait for society to set their course in aging. They recognize that they have the power of choice and resources to determine how to transition into older age (Anderson & Stewart, 1994).

The participants approach their aging utilizing analytical and organizational skills and competence they developed as a result of obtaining a college education and working for many years as successful professional women. They strongly believe in the power of mind over body and in executing control over the future conditions of their aging. Aging is perceived as a project with timelines and is placed in certain locations in the geographic space and in the communities.

On an individual level, acknowledging aging as an embodied experience, women addressed maintaining physical, emotional, and cognitive health as the most important priority. “Keeping the mind fertile” and preserving the continuity of learning, implementing new projects, and making a difference in the community is another priority that is an essential part of women’s social and professional functioning in their present lives. The women view themselves as “independent economic entities” (Anderson & Steward, 1994) and create their own financial safety. Financial planning of the future in
various forms ensures women’s independence and the shift in values from external to internal invites frugal living as a component of financial planning.

On a social level, the participants’ diverse strategies utilize resources and seek opportunities to secure the unknown territory of aging. Social support systems refer to the activities and relationships that provide the quality of life for people in the community (Comerford, Henson-Stroud, Sionainn, & Wheeler, 2004). From strengthening the existing support groups to proactively creating intergenerational networks, women consciously envisioned being involved in an active social life and pursuing dreams of their own among friends, family members, religious or spiritual communities, and local communities. The findings of this study are in line with the findings of another qualitative study that explored professional women’s retirement adjustment and revealed that maintaining and/or creating social connections and activities was a positive factor in aging for older professional women (Price, 2003).

On a cultural level, some of the participants, following the highly visible role models of graceful aging, asserted the need to acknowledge and normalize the sexuality of older women. They refused to become invisible and relished the freedom to express their sexuality with younger men. In some ways, the new cultural stereotype of “cougars,” or older women pursuing relationships with younger men, signifies emerging women’s entitlement to sexual equality, including their right to experience sexual pleasures with younger partners without guilt (Wood, Mansfield, & Koch, 2007).

The participants, refuting cultural messages regarding “age-appropriate” behaviors for single older women, confidently explored various activities and hobbies that are typically associated with younger people or married women.
The women in the study, acting as educators, promoted the normalcy of aging single and acknowledged the power of older professional, highly educated women in society that is different compared to “male” power. Focusing on existing power relationships in society, the women in the study questioned the necessity to mold their social identities in order to conform to the patriarchic constructs of power. They voiced the concern that the unique qualities that professional, highly educated women bring to politics and societal structures are undermined because they are perceived as being weak and less competitive.

At the same time, as was noted by the participants, if a woman in a highly advanced professional or political position exhibits assertiveness and decisiveness, she is perceived as being cold, a “ball buster,” and a threat to the balance of power that is still typically held by older white men. However, the Baby Boom women in the study provoked and embraced change in power structures and highlighted the beginning of the structural and ideological shift toward the acceptance of the power of an older professional woman.

*The Consequences of Implementing Strategies*

It is hoped that this research clearly showed that while single, professional, highly educated Baby Boom women in this study constructed their aging process for the most part, as positive, liberating, and empowering experience. They also perceived the cultural meaning of aging single as problematic and employed strategies to challenge mainstream ideologies of aging as “old maid.” The participants are in the process of finding an appropriate name for aging Baby Boom women and claiming a new place in society. Another important consequence of having the increasingly large numbers of single, highly
educated, professional Baby Boom women in the U.S. is the emergence of females competing with males in professional and political fields. These highly educated, professional older females possess the well developed skills and abilities to create change in societal power distribution.

The participants acknowledged that the existence of their large cohort would inevitably lead to a significant transformation of the culture of youth. The participants internalized ageist views in early life and still carry them as they age. The cultural shift in understanding and constructing the meaning of aging is coming with the development of conscious awareness of the natural progression of aging in the life course. This cultural shift requires awareness of other generations and cohorts and awareness of social contexts and cultural climate in which aging is experienced (Biggs, 2008).

**Significance of the study**

The exploration of existing literature on single, professional, highly educated, midlife women and the perception of one’s own aging, revealed that this topic is basically omitted from research attention. This dearth of research in this area signifies a great deal of invisibility regarding such issues and a probable widespread reluctance to ask difficult questions about aging. It is hoped that the present study will promote recognition of the cultural denial of aging, in which culture and society devalues, marginalizes, and discriminates against older people in general, and single older women in particular. It is expected that the results of this study will contribute to the body of qualitative literature that explores the means and strategies by which single older women resist the imposed sociocultural stereotypes of aging and will allow the unfolding of new possibilities, choices and the potential that come with age. The Baby Boom women’s aging is diverse
and it has a deep positive content. It is hoped that the findings of this study will be used to advocate for more sensitive addressing of the needs of single older women by therapists and by the community. Clinicians should observe and challenge their assumptions of the sexuality of older single women and educate their clients about safe sexual practices. The recognition of the new emergent identity of older single women by therapists would promote enhancing of older single women’s freedom to choose lifestyles and ways of aging that are suited to them.

Limitations of the Study and Implications for Further Research

This study is limited by its small sample size as well as sampling techniques. The data was collected from a nonrandom sample. More studies with larger samples are needed to further validate and strengthen the comprehensive theory that describes aging for single, highly educated, professional Baby Boom women in the U.S. This sample was comprised of white, middle class, able-bodied women ages 47-59. Thus, the experiences of the minority women and women with physical disabilities are not represented in the data. These participants reside in the Pacific Northwest and the themes that are salient to their aging may not be identical for women who reside in other areas of the Unites States. The women in the study were highly educated and, therefore, were afforded privilege by virtue of their race, class, and educational status.

In addition to geographic limitations, only two women in the study were homosexual and it is not known whether the same themes would surface in a larger sample of lesbian women. Future research might focus on exploring attitudes toward one’s own aging among less educated women with lower socio-economic status and older single minority women. Future studies might also examine the construction of aging among
women with physical disabilities. It would be valuable to compare the experience of aging for single, professional, highly educated women ages 45 - 60 in other countries with the experience of aging for Baby Boom women in the U.S., possibly highlighting differences and/or similarities in socio-cultural contexts and conditions, and stereotypes related to aging.
References


Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire
Demographic Questionnaire

Today’s Date________________

Age:________________________

Race/Ethnicity:_______________________

Highest level of education completed: ________________________

Professional occupation:_____________________________________

Sexual orientation:_______________________________________

Type of residence (house, apartment, condo):________________________

Own or Renting? _______________________

Marital status: Single ___Divorced ____Widowed _____

Do you have any children? Yes _____No _____

If yes, please state how many _______________________________________

How old are your parents? _______________________________________

If your parents passed away, how old were they? ___________________

Please describe the current status of your physical health________________

Are you religious? _____________________________________________

Are you spiritual? _____________________________________________
Appendix B

Interview Guide
Interview Guide

There is a great need to explore how single, professional, highly educated Baby Boom women perceive their own aging and how they re-negotiate self-identities. In order to understand and more sensitively respond to the needs of single, professional, highly educated middle-aged women, I would like to talk to you about your experience of aging and get a complete picture of what factors influence or impact your experience. I will be asking you some questions, and you can answer them with as much detail as you can provide. There are no right or wrong answers. I may ask you some follow up questions and clarify some of your statements. I will be using a tape recorder; please speak clearly so the tape can capture everything you say. Please avoid giving any details that may identify you.

Interview Questions

1. What does aging mean to you?
2. When did you first become aware of being a middle-aged woman?
4. What is your experience of being an older professional woman?
5. What are advantages and disadvantages of aging as a single woman?
6. Are there cultural and social influences that affect your attitude toward your own aging? What are they?
7. Are there religious or spiritual influences that affect your attitude toward your own aging? What are they?
8. Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
9. Where do you see yourself in 20 years?
10. Where do you see yourself in 30 years?
11. Who do you think will be your primary caretaker when and if you need one?

12. Who will be your support system in a future?

13. What does the most desirable model of aging look like to you?

14. What do you plan to do to make transitioning into the next stage of aging better and how do you feel about your plan?
Appendix C

Focus Group Guide
Focus Group Guide

Introduction:

Good morning (afternoon). My name is Tatyana Shepel, I am a doctoral student at Antioch University Seattle. I am conducting a qualitative study that explores attitudes toward one’s own aging among single, professional, highly educated Baby Boom women. Thank you for volunteering to participate in my dissertation project. All of you already participated in individual interviews and agreed to discuss aging in a group format. This is the first of three focus groups and it will last an hour and a half. Before we begin, let me remind you of some of the ground rules. The information you share today will be used for a research purpose only; you will not be identified in any way in the final text. However, I cannot guarantee such confidentiality from other participants here. I suggest each of you decide how much you would like to share with the whole group, and all of the participants here verbally agree to protect confidentiality of group discussions and identities of the member of the group. Do all of you agree to keep everything said in the group confidential? Do you have any questions or comments?

Before we introduce ourselves, let me outline the way this focus group works. There are no right or wrong answers but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. Please speak up – only one person should talk at a time. I am tape-recording this group and I do not want to miss any of your comments. Please say your name when you start speaking. We will be on a first name basis for this discussion. You may choose a pseudonym if you want to protect your identity. Please go around the circle and introduce yourself. I would like to start our discussion by asking you to reflect on the meaning of your own aging. What does aging
mean to you? What social and cultural influences impact your perception of your own aging? What strategies do you employ to challenge cultural stereotypes of aging and to negotiate your own aging as a single, professional, highly educated woman? The probe questions: Would you explain more? Would you give me an example? Do you have anything else to add?

In closure: Any last thoughts? Thank you for your participation.
Appendix D

Participant Consent Form for Individual Interview
Antioch University Seattle Informed Consent Form

The Psy.D. Program supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research and related activities. The following information is provided so that you can decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time, and that if you do withdraw from the study, you will not be subjected to reprimand or any other form of reproach.

Procedures to be followed in the study, identification of any procedures that are experimental, and approximate time it will take to participate:

I am being invited to participate in a study exploring attitudes toward one’s own aging among single, professional, highly educated Baby Boom women. I understand that my participation will involve filling out the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II) that will take approximately 5 minutes to complete. If I agree to participate in research study, I hereby authorize Tatyana Shepel, a doctoral student at Antioch University, Seattle, to interview me about my thoughts and concerns with regard to my aging. I will participate in one audio-taped interview that will be approximately 120 minutes in length. I understand that I will complete a questionnaire at the beginning of the interview to provide demographic information such as race/ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, marital status, religion, professional occupation, health and education. I understand that I will be asked questions regarding attitudes toward my own aging and social and cultural contexts that influence my attitudes. I understand that the researcher, Tatyana Shepel, will give me the opportunity to review my answers and to confirm the accuracy of recorded data. I understand that the recording of the interview will be transcribed by a professional transcriber who will sign a confidentiality agreement. I understand that after the interview I will have an informal “debriefing” over free lunch with the researcher where I can ask any questions with regard to the study and process my thoughts and feelings about the interview. I understand that the researcher, Tatyana Shepel, may want to contact to me for clarification during 6 months following the interview. I understand that the information in the dissertation text will be reported as patterns and themes and no identifying information will be published.

Description of any attendant discomforts or other forms of risk involved for subjects taking part in the study:

I understand that there is no physical risk but there is a risk of psychological stress. I understand that the nature of questions concerning aging may be emotionally overwhelming. I understand that I can refuse to answer any questions and may terminate my participation in this study any time, without penalty. I understand that if I experience stress during or after participation in this study, I will be provided with a referral to a licensed mental health professional for one free psychological consultation to discuss my feelings about my participation in this research. I understand that I will receive a list of
names and phone numbers of mental health professionals working with women and/or geriatric population should I choose to seek treatment. I understand that I will receive a package of information including books and articles on successful aging at the end of the interview.

**Description of benefits to be expected from the study or research:**

It is expected that this study will contribute to a better understanding of aging from the perspectives of single, professional, highly educated Baby Boom women and the findings will be used to advocate for addressing their needs more sensitively by therapists and the community.

**Appropriate alternative procedures that would be advantageous for the subject:**

Since this is an exploratory study and does not involve mental health treatment, there are no other alternative treatments. My participation in this study is on a voluntary basis; if I decide not to participate, or decline to continue at any time, I will still be able to receive mental health referrals if I so wish.

I have read the above statement and have been fully advised of the procedures to be used in this project. I have been given sufficient opportunity to ask any questions, I had concerning the procedures and possible risks involved. I understand the potential risks involved and I assume them voluntarily. I likewise understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without being subjected to reproach. I may also ask for a summary of the results of this study.

Signature __________________________ Date __________

Subject and/or Authorized Representative

Signature __________________________ Date __________

Subject and/or Authorized Representative
Appendix E

Participant Consent Form for Focus Group
Antioch University Seattle Informed Consent Form

The Psy. D. __________________ Program supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research and related activities. The following information is provided so that you can decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time, and that if you do withdraw from the study, you will not be subjected to reprimand or any other form of reproach.

Procedures to be followed in the study, identification of any procedures that are experimental, and approximate time it will take to participate:

I am being invited to participate in three focus groups exploring attitudes toward one’s own aging among single, professional, highly educated Baby Boom women. I understand that each focus group will last approximately one and a half hours and will take place in a comfortable, private room. I understand that there will be 5-8 participants and the researcher will moderate the group. I understand that group discussions will be audio taped. I understand that the researcher will ask questions about the meaning of aging, cultural and social contexts that influence my attitude toward aging and the strategies I employ to re-negotiate self-identity as an older woman. I understand that I may request an informal debriefing after the focus groups and process my thoughts and feelings about my participation in focus groups with the researcher.

Description of any attendant discomforts or other forms of risk involved for subjects taking part in the study:

I understand that there is no physical risk but there is a risk of psychological stress. I understand that the nature of questions concerning aging may be emotionally overwhelming. I understand that I can refuse to answer any questions. I understand that there is a risk of breach of confidentiality. I understand that the researcher will begin the focus group by asking the participants to discuss the importance of keeping information discussed in the focus group confidential amongst each other. I understand that the researcher will ask each participant to verbally agree to keep everything discussed in the room confidential. I understand that if I experience stress during or after participation in this study, I will be provided with a referral to a licensed mental health professional for one free psychological consultation to discuss my feelings about my participation in this research. I understand that I will receive a list of names and phone numbers of mental health professionals working with women and/or geriatric population should I choose to seek treatment.

Description of benefits to be expected from the study or research:
All participants will receive an abstract of dissertation when research is completed. It is expected that this study will contribute to a better understanding of aging from the perspectives of single, professional, highly educated Baby Boom women and the findings will be used to advocate for addressing their needs more sensitively by therapists and the community.
Appropriate alternative procedures that would be advantageous for the subject:

Since this is an exploratory study and does not involve mental health treatment, there are no other alternative treatments. My participation in this study is on a voluntary basis; if I decide not to participate, or decline to continue at any time, I will still be able to receive mental health referrals if I so wish.

I have read the above statement and have been fully advised of the procedures to be used in this project. I have been given sufficient opportunity to ask any questions, I had concerning the procedures and possible risks involved. I understand the potential risks involved and I assume them voluntarily. I likewise understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without being subjected to reproach. I may also ask for a summary of the results of this study.

Signature ___________________________ Date _________
Subject and/or Authorized Representative

Signature ___________________________ Date _________
Subject and/or Authorized Representative