Chapters of Our Lives: Life Narratives of Midlife and Older Australian Women

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A narrative approach was used to explore whether women perceive their later years as a time of loss, stability, or gain, and the explanations they give for their perceptions. Life review interviews were held with 20 married or previously married mothers aged 60–65 living in lower-income suburbs of Sydney, Australia. Participants were asked to consider their life story as a book, to divide the book into chapters, and to entitle each chapter. Two types of gain narrative accounted for 70% of the stories: one (breakouts) described gains that resulted from the woman's own actions, and the other (stress relief) described gains from role changes and the passage of time. A further 20% described continuing contentment with their lives, and 10% of the accounts described later life in terms of losses. The findings suggest that one reason for the later life satisfaction regularly found by surveys of older adults may be the disappearance or diminishment of previous life stressors. As part of a planned cohort comparison, similar interviews were held with women aged 50–55 and 40–45. An additional category of ongoing stress was required to accommodate their narratives.

KEY WORDS: women; aging; midlife; life narratives.

Sociologically oriented accounts of heterosexual women's later lives emphasise women's movement into and out of various roles: wives, mothers, workers, friends, grandmothers, retirees, and widows. Psychologically oriented approaches note that role changes are accompanied by physical, cognitive, and psychological losses and gains. In the present study, we used a narrative approach to identify whether women in their 60s see themselves as experiencing predominantly losses, stability, or gains. A comparison was made with women in their 40s and 50s.

The literature on aging presents an ambiguous picture. The "loss" view of later life—with its focus on losses of vigour, employability, health, memory,

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and so on—remains very strong in lay and professional discourse, and it underlies much social policy planning (McCallum & Geiselhart, 1996). At the same time, community surveys show that there is very little change with age in life satisfaction and well-being, and sometimes there is a modest increase with age (Carstensen, 1992; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999).

A number of researchers have described intrapsychic changes and gains that could underlie this maintenance of well-being. Ryff (1982), for example, has proposed that there is a shift in later life away from "instrumental" values, such as achievement, and toward "terminal" values, such as happiness. Brandstadter (2002) proposed a similar shift from "tenacious goal pursuit" to "flexible goal adjustment." Reker and Wong (1988) found that older adults put more emphasis than younger adults did on self-transcendence and collectivism and less emphasis on personal achievement. Carstensen (1992) described a process of "socio-emotional selectivity," whereby older individuals reduce their social

interactions to those that maximize and deepen social and emotional gains. All of these authors viewed the changes they described as sources of later life well-being.

In literature reviews Diener et al. (1999) and Stanley and Cheek (2003) proposed that in the light of the multiple influences that can affect life satisfaction—for example, temperament, health, values, and environment—new measurement approaches are needed that can show how individuals integrate these various influences into their own thinking and feeling about how they stand in the world.

In line with these proposals, in the present study we used a narrative approach to explore the ways in which lower-income mothers perceive their later years. In particular, we considered whether they see this as a time of losses, stability, or gains, and explored the explanations that they provide for their perceptions. The research procedure involved a life review interview, at the end of which participants were asked to think back on the life they had just described, to envisage that life story as a book, and to describe and name the chapters. This procedure was developed by McAdams (1985, 1989) and it has its theoretical base in narrative theory (Bluck & Habermas, 2001; Gergen & Davis, 2003; Kenyon & Clark, 2001; Leonard & Burns, 2001).

Narrative theory holds that people tend to construct their lives into a coherent and meaningful story. Each person's life story is considered an "internalized narrative integration of past, present and anticipated future, which provides the person with a sense of unity and purpose" (McAdams, 1989, p. 161) and allows them to develop future expectations and plans. Narratives are always constructed from the position of the present, so that in later life they may include some reconstruction of the past to fit the present: for example, people as they get older may come to see their parents in a different light. This constructed narrative *is* each person's experience of aging, which narrative theory sees as quite distorted by research that is based on *a priori* assumptions, for example, assumptions that certain age-related losses will "naturally" be salient.

The design of the present study drew in particular on several concepts within narrative theory. Most important, narrative theory holds that the life stories of people in particular circumstances are likely to highlight particular themes or story types, for example, stories of generativity, contamination, or redemption (McAdams, 1985, 1989; McAdams,

Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). Our study followed this approach as we looked for story types relevant to losses, stability, and gains in the narratives of older women living in the lower-income western suburbs of Sydney.

A second important concept is that of cohort differences. Elder's longitudinal studies (e.g., Elder & Johnson, 2002) have shown that life events are experienced differently by people of similar background but different birth cohorts, due to the interaction of environmental influences with developmental age. Longitudinal studies that included quantitative measures of life satisfaction across the lifespan have also demonstrated cohort differences (Costa et al., 1987). In Australia, as in many other countries, women's roles have changed rapidly in recent decades, away from a more "traditional" toward a more independent model. This suggests that the aging experience may differ between cohorts; to allow for this effect, our study included women from three age groups, aged 60–65, 50–55, and 40–45 years at the time of initial interview. In this article we first report on the narratives of women aged 60–65, and then the comparative material from the two younger groups. Follow-up interviews in 5 and 10 years will allow consideration of whether cohort differences persist as the younger groups age and a new age 40–45 group is added.

In an earlier article (Leonard & Burns, 1999) we described the "turning points" (Clausen, 1993, 1997) that women saw as constituting significant changes in their life stories or as deepening an ongoing direction. This material supported the idea of positive changes in later life. For example, personal growth experiences constituted over one-quarter of all the turning points that were identified by the participants, and almost one-half of these occurred after age 40. Health problems, which are commonly considered to be more salient in later life, were in fact most often nominated as turning points by younger women. These findings support the views of Ryff (1982), Carstensen (1992), and Brandstadter (2002) on positive developments in later life.

On the other hand, it is noted that for women, some types of loss—of beauty, of male admiration, and of grown children who leave behind an "empty nest"—have often been seen as occurring quite early. This view has been trenchantly summarized by Gergen (1990) as "finished at 40," and it suggests that experiences of loss (of different kinds) might emerge in the life stories of all three of the age groups sampled. Given these conflicting aspects, no

predictions were made about the directions that the women's life stories might take.

Three research questions were explored.

- First, how do the women divide up their life narratives into chapters of a book?
- Second, do the narratives of the 60–65 group emphasize losses, stability, or gains with age; and what explanations do they offer for these perceptions?
- Third, how do the later chapters of women aged 40–45 and 50–55 compare with those of the 60–65 age group?

METHOD

The Sample

As the interviews were lengthy, the sample was small ($N = 60$) and limited to English-speaking women who were following what Helson and Picano (1990) described as the traditional or neo-traditional story-line—that is to say heterosexual, married, with children, leading family-oriented rather than career-oriented lives, and not independently wealthy. The age range 60–65 (born 1931–1936) was chosen for the oldest group ($N = 20$), as this is when Australian women become eligible for the means-tested age pension (previously at age 60 but currently being raised in stages to age 65). The two other groups ($N = 20, 20$) were chosen to be 10 (born 1941–1946) and 20 (born 1951–1956) years younger. The sample was recruited from western Sydney, which has an over-representation of people of lower socio-economic status, and this was reflected in the educational backgrounds of the sample. No sample members remained at school beyond year 10; age 15 was the median at which participants left school, and some had only a few years of schooling, due to family relocations and other reasons.

Most of the women in all three cohorts married young, at a median age of 22 years. Most had two or three children; three-quarters of the children were born before the mothers were age 30. Marital breakdowns, including separation and divorce, were common; 6 women in their 60s, 14 in their 50s and 17 in their 40s reported some form of breakdown. The overall rates (30, 70, and 85%) seem extremely high, but they reflect the fact that divorced and separated women are over-represented in areas with lower-cost housing. The higher rate for the younger cohorts is consistent with the sharp increase in the Australian divorce rate after 1975, when those born between 1951–1956 were in their 20s and those born between 1941–1946 in their 30s (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001).

The women were contacted through requests for volunteers made to community organizations, such as community health centers, neighborhood centers, and the Older Women's Network.

Procedure

Interviews were based on the personal life story procedure of McAdams (1985). To encourage rapport, each age group was interviewed by a female interviewer of a similar age. Interviewers were mature age social science students who had been trained in the procedure. The interviewers used a time-line chart to enter the major events and experiences described and the ages at which they occurred. After introducing themselves, they showed each participant the time-line chart and told her that:

> What I'd really like to get today is an idea of the story of your life—where it has been and where it might be going. So what I have here is this sheet with different ages written down the side that I'd like us to go through and write down the important things in your life and when they happened. I won't write down everything because it will be on the tape. Is that OK? So, just to start, we might talk about your family of origin.

Participants were guided through the full range of their life "careers," including paid and unpaid work, family, physical, social, financial, and any other topics (such as religion) that were important to them. When the life review was completed the women were asked, in the light of what had been discussed, to consider their lives as a book, to decide how they would divide the book into chapters, and to select a title for each chapter. All interviews were conducted in one session that lasted 2–3 hr, in a location chosen by the participant. The interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed.

Analysis

The age spread and number of chapters was tallied for each age group. The narratives of the age 60–65 women were then analyzed. As a first step, the book chapter titles were used to sort the interviews

into groups on the basis of whether they suggested losses, stability, or gains in later years. The authors then separately read through each transcribed interview to establish the validity of this grouping. On the basis of these readings several interviews were moved to another category, and it was agreed that the gains group should be divided into two, depending on whether or not the gain was seen as resulting from the woman's own actions. In the first case (breaking out), the participant described herself as making some change in mid- or later life that delivered her from an unsatisfactory situation (in most cases an unsatisfactory family situation). In the second case (stress relief) the unsatisfactory situation diminished or disappeared largely of its own accord, partly or wholly due to the passage of time. The stability group was renamed "continuing contentment" to indicate that these women's stability was of a positive kind. The fourth group was categorized simply as "loss." Using the same procedure, the later chapters of the younger groups were then examined for evidence of these four story types. It was found that a fifth category of "ongoing stress" was required for those women who described themselves as currently struggling to cope with a range of life problems.

RESULTS

Question 1. How Do the Women Divide Up their Life Narratives into Chapters of a Book?

The chapters into which participants divided their stories largely followed generally agreed upon family life stages—for example childhood, adolescence, workforce entry, courtship and marriage, birth of children, raising children, children leaving home, and retirement. New chapters were also commenced with the occurrence of significant life events, such as moving from one country to another, ending a marriage, or starting a new relationship. Chapter titles were often a bald statement of the life stage covered (for example "Bob's retirement"), and sometimes more personal and emotionally-toned ("Big birthday parties," "Comes the crunch," "Disaster time"), but overall provided a reasonable summary of the chapter contents. Table I presents two examples.

The average number of chapters identified by participants was 8.5; the range was 6–13. It is interesting that, although only the younger groups included women with fewer than six chapters, the mean number of chapters increased only slightly with age: 7.75

Table I. Book Chapter Titles of Two Women's Stories

Continuing contentment—Marie	Stress relief—Margaret
1. Big birthday parties	1. Father's favorite
2. My Christian life	2. Schooldays
3. Courtship and marriage	3. Religious days
4. Family	4. Family days
5. Work	5. Dark times
6. Fulfilling dreams for children	6. Happy interlude
7. Contented retirement within happy family	7. Disaster time
	8. Heavy burden time
	9. Contentment time

for the 40–45 group (range 3–13), 8.05 for the 50–55 group (range 3–12), and 8.5 for the 60–65 group (range 6–12).

As they were based on life stages and significant events, the chapters did not, of course, neatly parallel the women's life decades. However, the use of the time-line allowed us to establish the age at which particular chapters commenced, and thus to calculate the proportion of chapters that dealt with the women's lives after age 40. This ranged from 30 to 66%, with an average of 45%. There was no evidence that early events were seen as especially important: all participants covered their childhood and adolescence in one or two chapters, sometimes with adolescence, courtship, and marriage included in the same chapter.

Question 2. Do the Narratives of the 60–65 Group Emphasize Losses, Stability or Gains with Age; and What Explanations Do they Offer for These Perceptions?

Table II shows that the breaking out and stress relief stories between them accounted for 70% of the oldest group's narratives.

Table II. Story Types by Age Group

	Age group			
Story type	40–45 ($N = 19$)*	50–55 ($N = 20$)	60–65 ($N = 20$)	Total ($N = 59$)
Breaking out	10	7	7	24
Stress relief	0	6	7	13
Continuing contentment	4	2	4	10
Ongoing stress	5	3	0	8
Loss	0	2	2	4

*One participant was unable to continue her story beyond her mid-thirties.

Breaking Out Stories

Thirty-five percent of the 60–65 group described a time when they broke out from a previous way of life that they found unsatisfactory or oppressive. Born between 1931–1936, and not well-educated, these women had led rather conventional and restricted lives, while around them social attitudes and women's roles were changing. So they had plenty of role models for change, including their own children. Nevertheless, quite a long process could be involved. For example, two women's struggles for change first started when they were in their 30s and continued well into their 40s. The others occurred when the women were in their 40s or 50s.

Breakouts were triggered by different experiences. Elaine's began in her 40s when her husband moved the family from country to city. Up till then she had accepted harsh living conditions and her husband's authority. But when she saw how city women lived she had a change of heart. She divorced at age 47 and began a 10 year struggle to obtain a steady job and some financial security. By her late 50s she felt she had succeeded, and the last chapter of her book describes her retirement at 63, a trip to Europe, new activities, and new friends.

Helen's breakout was especially sudden. Her Chapter 5, entitled "Leaving work—different thinking," tells how, in her late 40s, she left a menial job that involved hard work in an unpleasant work environment. "I went to work one day and I just thought I don't have to put with this. . . . and I resigned there and then on the spot . . . and I never regretted it from that day onwards." She enrolled in a technical course, did well, and realized that "I had a lot going for me . . . . so I decided in the time left I wanted to do things for me." She titled the chapter that described her present life "Decision-making for the future—I want change." The changes she envisioned included traveling, expanding her social life, and, in particular, altering her relationship with her husband, whom she regards as old before his time.

> He's younger than me, only 58, but he's going on like he's 88. Like he comes home in the afternoon and puts the pajamas on at five or five-thirty, and to put it bluntly, it gives me the shits.

Judith found that asserting herself actually improved her marriage. Tired of the way she was living, she decided at age 41 to study for the School Leaving Certificate (Year 10), obtained a driving license, joined Meals on Wheels, and, prompted by her daughter, decided to change her life and make her own decisions. These changes brought her and her husband closer together. Her Chapter 5, "Traveling," told how she and her husband became "grey nomads" for a time, camping on riverbanks and learning more about each other than they had in many decades of more conventional marriage. Her Chapter 6, "Grandchildren," described her enjoyment of this new role and Chapter 7, "The way things are now," emphasized her new-found independence. An important marker of this was her receipt at age 60 of the age pension in her own right, rather than as her pensioner husband's spouse. She interpreted this as "not living off my husband any more," although, in fact, both forms of pension are paid by the government. Chapter 8 "Growing old together," describes her present life as "a miracle of closeness, loving, family and laughter," despite her husband's life-threatening illness and full-time care of her 92 year-old mother.

All women in this group believed that their breakouts had improved their lives, although they described many difficulties encountered along the way.

Stress Relief Stories

A further 35% of women offered later chapters that also described a significant improvement in their lives, but one that had come about through the passage of time and circumstances rather than their own efforts. Running through these accounts is the commonly reported experience of serenity after years of work and worry. One woman commented that "You seem to be free from a lot of the problems you've had for years and years," and another that "It seems like there was a whole package thing when you were working while the children were growing up and you were worried about the bills and the asthma." A third wished that "this stage of my life would go on forever," and a fourth commented that

> A friend of mine said to me last Thursday, she said 'Have a think about coming to our meditation group' and I thought, actually, I don't feel as if I need to meditate, I don't feel the need for that sort of thing now. . . . My life now is good as it is . . .

The diminution of family responsibilities—for example, children growing up, finances improving, domineering relatives finally dying—was seen as the major factor in these life improvements. However,

some women also described more particular events. Rose, for example, made two unsuccessful marriages, the second to a gambler, heavy drinker, and thief, who made constant demands on her for money and assistance. She spent 10 years on the move with her three children, trying to escape his demands. Salvation came in her 50s, when the police caught up with him, and he went to jail. She entitled the chapter that covered this time as "The resurrection years" and her final chapter as "Living my own life at last!"

It was notable that the stress relief sub-group described harder earlier lives than did the rest of their age group. A major theme was marriage to unsuitable men, which resulted in many difficulties. Continuing conflict with relatives and in-laws was another common theme, along with illnesses—their own and those of children and other relatives—and material deprivations. They saw the abatement of these stresses as providing them with peace of mind and the freedom to "live my own life at last."

Stories of Continuing Contentment

Twenty percent of the sample were women for whom traditional or neo-traditional family life had worked very well. They had generally happy marriages, good family experiences, and work they mostly found satisfying. As they got older and retired, they moved smoothly into various combinations of family, leisure, voluntary work, and other rewarding experiences. They reported age-related illnesses and deaths of loved ones, but accepted these as a natural part of life. This is not to say they had not known hardships. Gwen, for example, grew up in London during the war, when her family was split up, her school was hit by a firebomb, and "it was years before I could hear a plane come over without getting the shivers and shaking."

These women also offered explanations for their continuing contentment with their lives, often referring in particular to their "wonderful husband' and "marvelous family life." They also believed that age had changed their motivations somewhat, for example, "You have a different way of thinking. . . . You lose interest in material things." Some further explanations were offered. Two women attributed their past and present contentment to the inner security provided by their strong Christian beliefs, and Gwen (quoted above) believed that her early hardships had

made her more realistic than many people who have led easier lives. She commented that:

> People these days tend to feel that they have got to be given everything. . . . You think well why can't they just accept these things and get on with it and do something for themselves like we did? . . . Make the best of things.

Stories of Loss

Stories of loss were recounted by only 10% of the 60–65 group. Alice described her last 20 years as a series of painful blows, including her mother's Alzheimer's disease and subsequent death, the return home of one adult son who developed a brain tumour and became too ill to manage by himself, her father's death, and, in particular, her husband's retrenchment and subsequent death 2 years previously. She described her husband as "a wonderful man," and she saw his death as "the end of all our dreams."

Nora suffered fewer adversities than Alice, but the chapters devoted to the latter one-third of her life nevertheless focused on losses of various kinds, including deteriorating relations with her adult children, the death of her mother, and her husband's and her own retirement from work. Unusually for this sample, her last chapter dealt with her own death.

Question 3: How Do the Later Chapters of Women Aged 40–45 and 50–55 Compare with Those of the 60–65 Age Group?

Differences were most marked between the 60–65 and the 40–45 groups. None of the 40–45 group told stress relief narratives, and one-half of their stories fell into the ongoing stress category, which was not relevant to the 60–65 group. This provides a good summary of the differences between the two groups. The younger women described being fully engaged with all the crises of family life—crises with husbands, ex-husbands, boyfriends, children, health, jobs, money, housing, parents, siblings, and in-laws. The older group saw these things as mercifully mostly behind them. The 50–55 group was more mixed. Thirty percent told stress relief stories that did not differ greatly from those of the 60–65 group, perhaps because this sub-group had married and borne children young, so that their period of heaviest family responsibilities had passed.

Breaking out stories were also common among the two younger, and especially the youngest, age groups (see Table II). Born during and after World War II (in 1941–1946 and 1951–1956), these women grew up in a changing Australia where women still married young, but where many alternatives to conventional family life were becoming available. Their stories showed less tolerance of difficult husbands than did those of the oldest group, and relationship breakdowns were very common. These breakdowns were usually followed by re-partnerings and remarriages and some further relationship dissolutions.

Mature age study provided another common form of breakout. Reflecting the greater opportunities that had become available, the two younger groups were more likely to have undertaken some form of further education or training, and several of the 40–45 group who were single parents had used social security benefits to support themselves while undertaking university studies. The 40–45-year-olds were also more likely to have acquired on-the-job skills, such as office management. Some described more exotic forms of breakout: for example, after a marriage break-up, one had gone to India in search of spirituality, and then joined a rock band. Not all of these breakouts had as yet brought gains in well-being, but the women believed, or at least hoped, that they would.

Particularly notable among the youngest group was an emphasis on the importance of self-actualization and questioning the traditional feminine gender role. They explained their breakout actions using phrases such as "needing space to be myself" and "finding a way of creating my own fulfillment," phrases that did not appear in the stories of the 60–65 group.

Four of the 40–45-year-old women and two of the women in their 50s told stories of continuing contentment. Like those in their 60s, these women described a satisfying mix of good marriage; good relations with children, relatives, and friends; and enjoyable work and other interests. Being younger, they were more intensely involved in family responsibilities, but even some of the 40–45-year-olds described themselves as presently adapting to a new stage of family life. One devoted 43-year-old mother, who had feared the advent of the "empty nest," described how easily she was making this transition.

> I've just thought that all my life I've worried about the girls leaving home and growing up. I love my girls so much I thought I can't deal with them grow-ing up. And then a couple of years ago, it was almost as if God tossed them out of the nest or something. Because I'm getting to the stage where I want them to leave so that my husband and I can just have our own life. I never thought I could feel like that!

None of the 40–45-year-olds, and only two of the 50–55-year-olds, told narratives of loss. These two women were in difficult circumstances to which they could see no end. For example, Lyn had severe arthritis, cared for a mother with Alzheimer's disease, and was being threatened by her siblings over the terms of their mother's will. She entitled the chapter that dealt with her current life "The humor of being human," and commented of the future that "I don't think I'll have a final chapter, I don't think I'll be around to write it."

DISCUSSION

The first research question asked how women aged 60–65 might divide up their lives into chapters of a book and what relative emphasis they would place on life after age 40. The number of chapters devoted to later life ranged from just under one-third to just under two-thirds, with an average of 45%. This allocation clearly shows that the participants did not see their development as "finished at 40," as Gergen (1990) described women's lives as represented in much of traditional family literature.

A second interest was in whether the later years were described predominantly in terms of loss, stability, or gain. The clear finding was that stories of gain were most common, and these could be divided into two broad groups: breakouts, where the gain resulted from the woman's own actions; and stress relief, where it came about through role changes and the passage of time. The narratives of both these groups make it clear that these women had endured many stresses in earlier adulthood. They described difficult, heavy drinking, ill, and sometimes violent partners; disabilities and serious illnesses of children and other intimates; health problems of their own; money worries and hardships; unpleasant workplaces; painful conflicts with relatives; and attacks on their self-esteem. The fact that the majority of the sample saw their present lives as such an improvement on their past strongly suggests that one reason for the later life satisfaction regularly found in surveys (Diener et al., 1999) may be simply the disappearance or diminution of previous stresses. It is worth noting that most were also drawing, or were

eligible to draw, the means-tested Australian age pension, which provided a financial sense of security that was often lacking in their earlier years.

The next most frequent category was stability or continuing contentment. These women represented in one way or another the successful face of traditional or neo-traditional women's roles. They had married wisely, had good relations with their children and other relatives and friends, and had many interests. They moved smoothly through the role changes that are often seen as problematic for women— for example, the empty nest, and retirement from the workforce (their husbands' and their own)—to find new interests and activities, including voluntary work, to replace their former activities.

Despite the emphasis on loss in lay and professional discourse, only a small minority of the sample saw their later years in this way. It may be that they were still too young to share this view. The 5 and 10 year follow-up interviews will show whether there is an increase in loss stories.

It is not possible, of course, to establish from these narratives whether the life difficulties described by one group were empirically greater than those of others, or whether they merely perceived them as greater, or whether indeed they brought their troubles on themselves. But from a narrative theory perspective this is not an issue, because it is the "internalized narrative" that each individual constructs that constitutes people's experience and defines their identity (McAdams, 1985, 1989). What the narratives indicate is that, for a majority of the sample, later life was a time when troubles commonly abated, and life markedly improved.

Most women offered, or at least implied, explanations for their current state. In many cases these were obvious—for example, the disappearance of previous stressors, achievement of long-held goals, bereavements or other losses, good fortune in marriage, or religious beliefs. These explanations could be veridical, or they could involve an imaginative construction of past and future into "stories that make sense to them and their audiences, that vivify and integrate life and make it more or less meaningful" (McAdams, 2001, p. 2). Whichever, the great majority offered reasons—a wide diversity of reasons— for finding the early 60s to be a good time of life.

These positive stories of aging are in line with the view that later life can bring significant gains. As noted earlier, the nature of these gains have been conceptualized differently by different researchers, such as Ryff (1982), Brandstadter (2002), Carstensen (1992), and Reker and Wong (1988). It would be hard to say which of these theoretical positions the present findings best support, because some aspects of the participants' stories were relevant to all of them. There was plenty of evidence of contentment in the here and now, as proposed by Ryff (1982) and Carstensen (1992), and the women's descriptions of their community activities in retirement support Reker and Wong's (1988) views on the increase in collectivism and spirituality in later life (You have a different way of thinking . . .. You lose interest in material things).

What the present study can perhaps add to this is the emphasis placed by the 60–65 group on the contrast between their earlier life of work and family responsibilities and worries and their present relative freedom. As most had limited education and a history of low-paid jobs, the losses generally ascribed to retirement—loss of the status, income, structure, and sense of purpose provided by the job—were not much of an issue. So it may be that these women's frequent depiction of later life as a good time is stronger than would be the case with a more advantaged sample. And, of course, the present sample is small, and the findings may not generalize even to the population sampled. They do however point up an aspect of the traditional feminine gender role that has received relatively little attention: the joy that can come from sloughing off at least some of its demands. Future researchers could take up this issue.

The third research question concerned a comparison of the stories of the 60–65-year-olds and the two younger groups. It was found that the narratives of the two younger groups included a significant number of stories of ongoing stress, which those of the 60–65 group did not. Breakouts were as or more frequent than among the oldest group, and the 40–45 group in particular felt less constrained by traditional roles, were more likely to have separated quite early from men they found unacceptable, and made much more reference to the importance of empowerment and the assertion of their own individuality. Their narratives also reflected changed social circumstances—for example, the greater availability of divorce and of mature age study. None of the 40–45 group's narratives were of stress relief or of loss. The 5 and 10 year follow-up interviews will show if and when these themes emerge in the stories of this cohort.

Like all in-depth interviews, the present procedure raises the question of whether participants would present a different focus on another occasion.

Narrative theory holds that the internalized life story *is* the narrator's identity (McAdams, 1989), and that by midlife its major components are relatively stable. At the same time, the theory holds that because the story is always told from the viewpoint of the present, there is likely to be some reconceptualization of the past as the person ages and has new experiences. The 5 and 10 year follow-up interviews will explore if and how such changes occur among our sample, and whether stories of loss become more common as the 60–65 group moves into their 70s. The follow-up interviews will also allow consideration of the importance of cohort effects (Elder & Johnson, 2002). For example, it seems likely that the younger women's less traditional attitudes and greater emphasis on personal empowerment may lead them to construe their later life experience differently than the older cohort did.

The data strongly support narrative theory's proposition that it is the meaning that people ascribe to their life experiences that counts. The ways in which the 60–65 group dealt with losses provide a powerful example. Women in all four categories had suffered significant bereavements and other losses, but only a small minority made these the focus of their stories. This is encouraging evidence of older women's ability to disregard the emphasis on decline and loss so dominant in popular discourse about aging. In fact, many made jokes about their failure to match up to the cultural stereotype of the "doddery old lady." To the extent that this stereotype does limit older people's life satisfaction and community contribution, it seems overdue for revision.

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