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# Uncovering The Lived Experience Of Community-Dwelling Jewish Women Over 80 Who Self-Identify As Aging Successfully: A Phenomenological Study

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UNCOVERING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY-DWELLING JEWISH  
WOMEN OVER 80 WHO SELF-IDENTIFY AS AGING SUCCESSFULLY:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

A Thesis Presented

by

Rebecca Fredman

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Science  
Specializing in Nursing

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Although there is significant scholarly interest in defining the concept of successful aging, there are very few small-scale, in-depth qualitative studies examining the lived experience of women over 80 who self-identify as aging successfully.

**Aim:** The aim of this study is to explore the lived experience of a small group of community-dwelling Jewish women over 80 in a single county in Northwestern Vermont who self-identify as aging successfully.

**Approach:** This study has a phenomenological approach.

**Method:** Phenomenological interviews were conducted with five women over 80 years of age. Interview content was analyzed, and shared themes were synthesized.

**Findings:** Findings revealed the following shared themes: acknowledgement of extraordinary quality of life events and/or circumstances, extensive and ongoing social involvement with communities and/or individuals, and strong sense of self.

**Conclusions:** The lived experiences of participants who self-identified as aging successfully were characterized by gratitude for the lives they led and continue to lead, extensive and ongoing communal and interpersonal social engagement, and high levels of self-esteem and self-knowledge.

**Implications for practice:** Interventions focused on promoting gratitude, ongoing social engagement, and self-esteem/efficacy may improve individuals' chances of aging successfully; women over 80 respond positively given the opportunity to tell their story, and may benefit from affiliation with a religious community.

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Finally, I would like to thank the five women who agreed to participate in this study. They opened their homes and lives to me, and for this I am grateful.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  | Page |
|--|------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....                               | ii   |
| LIST OF TABLES .....                                 | v    |
| CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....                         | 1    |
| 1.1. Background.....                                 | 1    |
| 1.2. Why Jewish Women over 80?.....                  | 3    |
| 1.3. Purpose of Study.....                           | 4    |
| 1.4. Research Question.....                          | 5    |
| CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....                 | 6    |
| 2.1. Conceptual Frameworks for Successful Aging..... | 6    |
| 2.2. Comparable Qualitative Studies.....             | 8    |
| 2.3. Studies Examining Jewish Women over 80.....     | 9    |
| CHAPTER 3: METHODS.....                              | 11   |
| 3.1. Approach.....                                   | 11   |
| 3.2. Participant Recruitment.....                    | 11   |
| 3.3. Ethical Considerations.....                     | 13   |
| 3.4. Data-Gathering Methods.....                     | 14   |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 3.5. Data Storing and Protection Methods.....                | 16 |
| 3.6. Data Explication Methods.....                           | 18 |
| CHAPTER 4: ARTICLE FOR JOURNAL SUBMISSION: THE INTERNATIONAL |    |
| JOURNAL OF OLDER PEOPLE NURSING .....                        | 20 |
| SUMMARY STATEMENT OF IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE.....          | 23 |
| BACKGROUND.....  | 24 |
| METHODS.....   | 31 |
| FINDINGS.....  | 33 |
| DISCUSSION.....  | 37 |
| CONCLUSIONS.....   | 42 |
| PRACTICE AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS.....                      | 43 |
| REFERENCES.....  | 45 |
| TABLES.....  | 50 |
| COMPREHENSIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY.....                              | 55 |

## LIST OF TABLES

| Table   | Page |
|---|------|
| Table 1. Inclusion criteria for potential participants .....                    | 50   |
| Table 2. Sample questions for semi-structured key insider interviews.....       | 51   |
| Table 3. Data explication process for phenomenological interview analysis.....  | 52   |
| Table 4. Participant demographic information.....                               | 53   |
| Table 5. Shared themes characterizing the lived experience of participants..... | 54   |

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background

Aging is a fundamental part of the human experience. It is difficult to ignore the phenomenon of aging, particularly in industrialized nations. In the United States, the population of people over 80 is significant and only projected to increase. As of 2013, nearly 6 million people over 85 years of age lived in the US, with women outnumbering men at a ratio of 195.9 women for every 100 men. The population of people over 85 is projected to rise to 14.6 million in 2040, over double the population accounted for in 2013 (“Aging Statistics,” n.d.). Given these numbers, a robust scholarly interest in the topic of aging in general – and successful aging in particular – is warranted. What does it mean for a person to age successfully, and what factors contribute to successful aging? Numerous models exist to define the concept of successful aging, with conceptualizations ranging from the strictly biomedical to the psychosocial, as well as lay models emphasizing life-satisfaction and well-being (Cosco, Prina, Perales, Stephan, & Brayne, 2014).

Scholarly interest in successful aging is notable in numerous disciplines, including nursing, medicine, and the social sciences (Brandt, Deindl, & Hank, 2012; Cheng, 2014; Cosco, Prina, Perales, Stephan, & Brayne, 2014; Jeste, Savla, Thompson, Vahia, Glorioso, Martin, Palmer, Rock, Golshan, Kraemer, & Depp, 2013; Martin, Kelly, Kahana, Kahana, Willcox, Willcox, & Poon, 2015; Nimrod & Ben-Shem, 2015; Rowe & Kahn, 1997; Romo, Wallhagen, Yorman, Yeung, Christie, Eng, Micco, Perez-Stable, Eliseo, & Smith, 2013; Stowe & Cooney, 2015). Even considering this well-established



interest, small-scale, in-depth qualitative studies examining the lived experience of people over 80 are relatively rare in the past and current literatures of numerous disciplines, including nursing. As illustrated in the opening paragraph, the current US population of women over 80 vastly outnumbers its male counterpart, so in terms of numbers alone, women over 80 – particularly those who self-identify as successful agers – are a population worthy of closer, and more subtle, examination.

Small-scale, in-depth qualitative studies examining the lived experience of specific populations of older people are illuminating and useful because findings inform and expand theoretical understanding of successful aging among unique groups, ultimately guiding practice and research activities in nursing and health-related disciplines (Futrell, Wondolowski, & Mitchell, 1993; Jonsen, Norberg, & Lundman, 2015; Lewis, 2011). Learning more about the lived experience of specific groups of women over 80 who self-identify as successful agers has the potential to not only enhance the nature and quality of care provided to particular populations, but could also serve a larger, more vital purpose: answering the question of whether or not specific life experiences and/or characteristics might predict or indicate how successfully a woman will age.

## **1.2. Why Jewish Women over 80?**

Full disclosure: I am a Jewish woman, and I have in my life the pleasure of knowing and interacting with older, wiser Jewish women. My scholarly interest is also quite personal in nature; what can I learn – as a Jewish woman – that might allow me to age successfully? What knowledge will I pass on to my own daughters? It is not possible to separate these personal concerns from my scholarly and professional ones: what, as an advanced practice nurse and researcher, should I promote and implement across the life cycle to imbue my patients with the best opportunity to age successfully? By examining the lived experience of a small population of active, dynamic, community-dwelling Jewish women over 80, I hope to begin answering these questions.

Twentieth century American Jewry is characterized as part of a generation in transition, shifting from immigrant to mostly American-born, and from insular and excluded to more assimilated and upwardly-mobile (Glicksman & Koropecyj-Cox, 2009). A Jewish woman of 80 years – in theory, the youngest woman eligible for participation in this study – would have been born in the mid-1930s, and would have come of age, for example, between 1945 and 1955. The first half of the twentieth century was considerably tumultuous for many people living in the US and Europe. World War I preceded the Great Depression, which was followed by World War II and the Holocaust. A Jewish woman of 80 living in the US today, depending on her birth country, may have experienced the Holocaust first hand. If she was born in the US, she might very well have immigrant parents, or certainly grandparents. She may have experienced great shifts in wealth and status over her lifetime; she may have been the first female in her family to

receive an education beyond high school. For example, Glicksman's 2002 study of Jewish people over 65 residing in Philadelphia and the surrounding area found that 24% of the Jewish women had at least a college degree, an extraordinary accomplishment for any population of women during this time period.

I believe that researcher interest has the potential to render a population worthy of scholarly interest, particularly when combined with both a notable lack of comparable studies, as well as the nature of qualitative inquiry within the nursing discipline. An extensive review of the current and past nursing literature yielded not a single study examining the lived experience of Jewish women over 80. Beck (1994) stated, "Because nursing is primarily a social act between nurse and client, phenomenological perspective can help increase nurses' understanding of their clients by entering into their lifeworld" (p. 508). Keeping this in mind, a central aim of this phenomenological study is to illuminate the lived experience of a relatively unexplored population for the purpose of increasing understanding.

### **1.3. Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to reveal individual and collective themes characterizing the lived experience of community-dwelling Jewish women over 80 living in a single county in Northwestern Vermont, who self-identify as aging successfully. The value of developing an enhanced understanding of this unique population of women is multifold. First, the results of this study will add to the body of

research dedicated to understanding and conceptualizing successful aging as a highly personal subjective phenomenon. Secondly, conclusions that emerge as the result of this study have the potential to guide research and practice in nursing and other health-related disciplines with regard to the population of interest as well as other comparable populations. Finally, gaining an understanding of the themes that characterize the lived experience of this population – community-dwelling Jewish women over 80 who consider themselves to be aging well – might reveal deeper awareness of what exactly it is throughout the course of a lifetime that allows women to progress, with a meaningful measure of joy, grace, and dignity, to 80 years and beyond.

#### **1.4. Research Question**

What themes characterize the lived experience of community-dwelling Jewish women over 80 in Chittenden County, Vermont, who self-identify as aging successfully?

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.1. Conceptual Frameworks for Successful Aging

Numerous models and frameworks exist for the purpose of defining and measuring successful aging. The most widely accepted of these is arguably Rowe and Kahn's model of successful aging (1997), which allows observers – ostensibly physicians and researchers – to differentiate between usual versus successful aging based on objective criteria measurable by physical examination, cognitive testing, or surveys and questionnaires. One criticism of Rowe and Kahn's model is its focus on physiological measures to the exclusion of psychosocial components, and its lack of a subjective component for measuring successful aging (Martin et al., 2015). Cheng (2014) points out that to define successful aging based on a set of objective, researcher-driven standards ignores other potentially pertinent measures such as cognitive, psychological, and social functioning, as well as purely subjective lay measures such as self-rating, and thus fails to capture the complexity of the process. Evidence suggests the validity of self-rating as a meaningful outcome measure worthy of incorporating into conceptualizations of successful aging (Jeste et al., 2013), as well as the idea that people may self-identify as aging successfully in spite of disability or worsening physical and cognitive functioning (Jeste et al., 2013; Romo et al., 2013).

Another criticism of Rowe and Kahn's model is its narrow focus on late adulthood as a point to make a fixed assessment of how successfully a person is aging rather than viewing successful aging as a dynamic lifelong process. Integrating what Stowe and Cooney (2015) describe as a "life course" perspective into conceptualizations

of successful aging could enrich understanding of the phenomenon by acknowledging the diverse array of personal and social influences that contribute to the aging process over a lifetime. For example, Brandt et al. (2012) found an association between childhood living conditions and older peoples' chances of aging successfully, indicating that successful aging is a dynamic phenomenon deeply rooted in lived experience. Similarly, Israeli researchers studying older people's perspectives of successful aging as a process (as opposed to a condition) determined that the subjects themselves considered successful aging to be a positive outcome of a lifelong process characterized by positive decision-making earlier in life, resilience, and coping with change and loss (Nimrod & Ben-Shem, 2015).

While Rowe and Kahn's model does not fully account for the complexity inherent to successful aging as a phenomenon, the model's core components – decreased probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life – are certainly indicative of an older person's overall level of wellness. However, wellness at a fixed point in time is likely just one component of successful aging. In order to develop a holistic view of successful aging, it may be useful to examine the lived experience of people who identify as aging successfully. This is where the phenomenological approach and perspective becomes useful. By examining and meticulously interpreting individuals' lived experiences, researchers can uncover and begin to understand the underlying structure of the phenomenon of interest (Kleiman, 2004).

## 2.2. Comparable Qualitative Studies

Although small-scale, in-depth qualitative studies examining the lived experience of people over 80 are relatively uncommon in the literature of numerous disciplines, including nursing, medicine, and the social sciences, such studies certainly exist, and tend to offer insight into the experience of aging within culturally and/or geographically specific contexts. Lewis's 2011 study examining successful aging from the perspective of 26 Alaska Natives between ages 61 and 93 uncovered four "core elements" of "Eldership" (important characteristics of becoming a respected elder in the community), which included "emotional well-being" and "community engagement" (p. 545-546). Jonsen, Norberg, and Lundman's 2015 study, which assessed perceptions of meaning in life for ten people between ages 85 and 95 living in a small community in northern Sweden, uncovered distinct "themes" (synonymous with Lewis's core elements) that included "living in connection with others and nature" and "seeing oneself as a link between generations" (p. 224 -225). In a 1993 phenomenological study examining aging among community-dwelling people over 80 in one coastal town in Scotland, Futrell, Wondolowski, and Mitchell also uncovered common themes among participants, which in this case included "transfigurations signifying maturity" and "tempering the unavoidable with buoyant serenity" (p. 191).

The three above-mentioned studies, while quite different from one another, are similar in that the researchers were all able to synthesize distinct shared themes among participants, indicating that culturally and/or geographically specific groups of older individuals – to some extent – share insights, experiences, values, and/or characteristics.

This is both compelling and useful, because an understanding of the shared themes or elements uniting a unique population of older people might inform nurses and other health care professionals how to approach members of said population in terms of care provision, wellness promotion, and health-related interventions. It is also worth mentioning that all three studies strengthen the case for understanding aging as a unique, nuanced, and highly personal phenomenon requiring rigorous qualitative inquiry as a means for facilitating deeper understanding.

### **2.3. Studies Examining Jewish Women over 80**

As stated in Chapter 1, an extensive review of the current and past nursing literature yielded not a single study examining the lived experience of Jewish women over 80. However, the few studies that I discovered from other disciplines – anthropology and social work, respectively – offer a great deal of insight into the lives of the research participants, both as individuals and populations. In one study, the researcher analyzed transcripts of 30 American Jewish women over 80 in order to better understand how the participants experienced and perceived suffering during their lifetimes (Rubinstein, 2009). The researcher discovered several themes upon analysis, including “a general lack of direct reference to the holocaust as the exemplar of personal suffering,” “reviewing life and encountering the end of life,” and “suffering as a cultural construct” (p. 125). Conclusions not only illuminated the nature of suffering among the participants, but also indicated increased understanding of the participants as a population, including their “positioning” (thoroughly Americanized, although first generation), level of religious



observance (not orthodox, but more traditional than subsequent generations), and level of education (generally not college-educated, but highly oriented towards education for children and grandchildren) (p. 129).

In a 2002 study, which focused on a women's issues group consisting of single Jewish women in their 80s and 90s sharing “a desire to understand, learn and discuss sexuality in the context of their personal histories, their aging, their Judaism, and their current lifestyle,” the researcher - who was also the group leader - explored participants’ characteristics and interactions, as well as recurring themes connected to their self-perception and sexuality (David, p. 50-51). This fascinating article offered a glimpse into facets of inner life rarely considered among this age group, namely their sexuality. Observations concerning participants’ respective backgrounds and life experiences serve to enhance and add depth to the subject matter presented in the article.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

### 3.1. Approach

The science of phenomenology is concerned with describing phenomena – observable facts, occurrences, or circumstances – as lived experience. Phenomenology as a research method involves deliberate and systematic investigation of phenomena with the overriding goal of describing, or giving structure to, the lived experience of the phenomenon of interest (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). The philosophical and historical precedents of phenomenology are complex, and have prompted the development of numerous procedural frameworks for application of phenomenological research methods (Streubert et al., 2011). Although there is not necessarily a “right” or “wrong” way to approach phenomenological inquiry, it stands to reason that the researcher’s approach be as specific and methodical as possible in order to yield the richest raw material for analysis, and ultimately, a structured description of the phenomenon of interest. For this reason, as a novice phenomenological researcher, I chose to base my methodology on an article by Thomas Groenewald entitled *A Phenomenological Research Design Illustrated* (2004), which synthesized the core principles of phenomenological research designs and illustrated the methodology using concrete examples of each step.

### 3.2. Participant Recruitment

A purposive sample of five women was included in the study. In order to be considered, potential participants had to fulfill the following criteria: 1) participants had to self-identify as being female; 2) participants has to be over the age of 80; 3)

participants had to self-identify as being Jewish. Specific characteristics, such as participation in Jewish rituals and holidays, affiliation with a local synagogue or Jewish community, ethnic background, or level of religiosity were not considered. Women who converted to Judaism at some point during their lives were equally considered as potential participants; 4) participants had to be community-dwelling, which excluded individuals living in institutions such as nursing homes or assisted living facilities. Women living in communities for older people were equally considered, as were women living with family members; 5) participants had to live in Chittenden County, a county in Northwestern Vermont, and; 6) participants could not have current diagnoses and/or signs/symptoms of dementia.

Initial participants were recruited with the aid of *key insiders*, individuals having relationships with potential participants who volunteered assistance (Groenewald, 2004). In this case, the key insiders were two rebbetzins (Rabbi's wives), mother and daughter, who are affiliated with an orthodox Hassidic Jewish movement known for Jewish outreach and education. These key insiders were selected because they have well-established relationships with a diverse array of older Jewish women currently residing in Chittenden County, Vermont. Key insiders initiated contact with Jewish women who, in addition to fitting the inclusion criteria, appeared to be measurably active, independent, and engaged to increase the chance of recruiting participants who self-identify as aging successfully. Once key insiders established potential participants' interest, they were given a flyer displaying a brief explanation of the study, as well as the researcher's contact information. Contact – either by phone or email – was initiated by participants.

Snowball sampling was employed in order to trace additional participants (Groenewald, 2004).

### **3.3. Ethical Considerations**

This study was approved by the Internal Review Board of the University of Vermont (CHRBSS# 16-587). In order to ensure the ethical integrity of all research in the study, I made use of informed consent contracts for both participants and key insiders. Groenewald developed specific criteria for an informed consent contract based on Baily's (1996) recommended items (cited by Groenewald, 2004). The components of this contract, which are listed below in their entirety, are comprehensive, specific, and suitable to phenomenological research, and were thus employed for the purpose of the study. Participants were informed of the following:

- That they are participating in research
- The purpose of the research (without stating the central research question)
- The procedures of the research
- The risk and benefits of the research
- The voluntary nature of research participation
- The participant's right to stop the research at any time
- The procedures used to protect confidentiality (Groenewald, 2004)

The informed consent contracts (the key elements of which are outlined above) were presented to participants in person during our initial meeting, and participants were informed that they were welcome to review the contract and/or ask clarifying questions at

any time. If participants chose not to sign the contract, they were not pressured to do so or to participate in the study. In order to proceed with interviews, participants had to be in agreement with the contents of the contract, and the contract had to be signed.

### **3.4. Data-Gathering Methods**

**Phenomenological interviews.** Phenomenological interviews were conducted with all participants. Bentz and Shapiro (1998) and Kensit (2000) (cited by Groenewald, 2004) emphasized that phenomenological inquiry should allow data to emerge spontaneously. Keeping this in mind, I began each participant interview with the following prompt: *please, tell me about who you are, and describe some of your experiences that brought you to where you are today.* According to Kvale (1996) (cited by Groenewald, 2004), the role of the researcher in the unstructured phenomenological research interview is to “understand the world from the subjects point of view, to unfold meaning of peoples’ experiences.” To this end, I allowed the interviews to unfold organically and spontaneously, listened actively to participants, and engaged when necessary to gain clarification or enhanced understanding of participants’ experiences, feelings, beliefs, and values. Interviews took place in participants’ homes in order to maximize their comfort, and no additional parties were present during the interviews (although participants were offered the option of having another person present to promote a sense of safety).

**Interviews with key insiders.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key insiders in order to gain additional insight into the population represented by the participant sample. The types of questions utilized during these interviews are as follows:

- In your experience, what do you think contributes most the experience of Jewish women over 80 aging successfully?
- What role do you think Judaism plays in the experience of successful aging of Jewish women over 80?
- What do you think might cause a Jewish women over the age of 80 to age unsuccessfully?
- As a Jewish woman, what do you think is necessary in your own life to allow you to eventually age successfully?

**Memoing.** According to Miles and Huberman (1984) (cited by Groenewald, 2004) the practice of memoing describes “the researcher’s field notes recording what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the process” (Groenewald, 2004). I utilized this practice throughout participant interviews as an additional means of data collection.

**Triangulation.** The purpose of collecting data from three different sources – participant interviews, key insider interviews, and memoing – is to gain additional clarity about the phenomenon of interest (in this case, participant’s lived experience) by examining it from different vantage points. This practice, known as data triangulation, is employed in phenomenological research to contribute to the rigor of the study, which

ultimately translates to “a broader and more holistic description of the phenomenon under study” (Streubert, et al., 2011).

### **3.5. Data Storing and Protection Methods**

All interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of interviewees. In order to accomplish this, I utilized a professional interview recording application on a smartphone device. The advantages of employing this method over tape recording were numerous. First, the device is password-protected, which ensured confidentiality of interview content and the identity of interviewees. Secondly, this application allowed for immediate time-stamping and storage of the interviews as a series of files, each of which was assigned a unique interview code. Third, files could easily be backed up on a secure online server, which ensured the existence of back-up copies should the smartphone device become unserviceable. Finally, the recording application was sensitive and discreet; interviewees were not focused on a large or intrusive tape-recording device during interviews.

The interview settings were as free as possible from background noise and interruptions. Prior to each interview, the smartphone settings were adjusted to ensure that it would not receive calls or messages during the interview. As soon as possible after the interview, I listened to recordings and took notes. Groenewald (2004) recommends transcribing “key words, phrases and statements in order to allow the voices of the research participants . . . to speak.” These field notes, which were recorded immediately after each interview, are a secondary data source in qualitative research, and the first step in data analysis, or explication (Groenewald, 2004). It should be noted that memoing

describes the researcher's notetaking during the interview, whereas field notes are the notes taken directly after the interview.

The final step of the interview process (which effectively bridged the data-gathering and data-explication phases of the study) was transcription, whereby the researcher manually transcribed the interviews verbatim. As a novice phenomenological researcher, I considered the transcription process crucial for my transition from data-collector to data-explicator. Given this fact, as well as the study's relatively small sample of participants and key insiders, I personally transcribed all of the interviews onto a password-protected computer, where they were stored as electronic documents. Once the transcriptions were complete, printed drafts were presented to participants for validation. For each participant, I opened a uniquely coded electronic and paper file with the following divisions, as applicable (adapted from Groenewald, 2004):

- The informed consent agreement
- My notes made during the interview
- Field notes made subsequent to each interview
- Draft transcripts that were presented to the participant for validation, with confirmation of correctness and/or commentary by the participant about the transcript
- Any additional/subsequent communication between the participant and myself

For the purposes of this study, all electronic data – including audio recordings of interviews, typed notes, interview transcripts, and data in various stages of explication – was stored on a password-protected computer, as well as on a secure online server.



### **3.6. Data Explication Methods**

Groenewald (2004) utilizes a simplified version of Hycner's (1999) explication process for phenomenological interview analysis. I utilized this method, the phases of which are listed below. Concise explanations of each phase are provided in the sections that follow.

1. Bracketing and phenomenological reduction.
2. Delineating units of meaning.
3. Clustering of units of meaning to form themes.
4. Summarizing each interview, validating and modifying where necessary.
5. Extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary (Groenewald, 2004).

**Bracketing and phenomenological reduction.** During this stage, I set aside my own presuppositions in order to gain as subjective a position as possible with regard to the unique viewpoint of the participant. This phase involved listening to the audio recording of each interview repeatedly in order to gain a sense of the overall tone, or gestalt. The processes of writing field notes and transcribing the interviews contributed a great deal to this phase of explication.

**Delineating units of meaning.** During this stage, I extracted statements that were grasped as elucidating or illuminating the phenomenon of interest. I composed lists of units of meaning for each interview, and carefully examined them for redundancy. Groenewald (2004) emphasizes the challenging nature of this phase, given that the researcher has to judge what constitutes the units of meaning while simultaneously

bracketing her own presuppositions in order to avoid making inappropriate subjective judgements.

**Clustering of units of meaning to form themes.** During this stage, I examined the lists of units of meaning from each interview, and – after once more bracketing presuppositions in order remain true to the phenomenon of interest – grouped them together into clusters. Next, I attempted to derive meaning from the clusters, which were translated into central themes. Groenewald (2004) points out that overlap in clusters is to be expected given the nature of human phenomena.

**Summarizing each interview, validating and modifying where necessary.** At this point, I contacted the participants to determine if the essence of the interview was correctly captured. Modifications were made as necessary. I used this stage to validate both the interview transcripts as well as the overall essence of the interviews in order to avoid contacting participants unnecessarily.

**Extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary.** Once the first four phases had been applied to each interview, I examined the explicated data as a whole in order to determine if there were themes common to most or all of the interviews. Groenewald (2004) emphasizes that care must be taken to not deem themes “common” if significant differences exist, and that unique or minority voices are important to the phenomenon of interest as well.

**CHAPTER 4: ARTICLE FOR JOURNAL SUBMISSION:**

**THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF OLDER PEOPLE NURSING**

UNCOVERING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY DWELLING JEWISH  
WOMEN OVER 80 WHO SELF-IDENTIFY AS AGING SUCCESSFULLY:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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## ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS

**Background:** Although there is significant scholarly interest in defining the concept of successful aging, there are very few small-scale, in-depth qualitative studies examining the lived experience of women over 80 who self-identify as aging successfully.

**Aim:** The aim of this study is to explore the lived experience of a small group of community-dwelling Jewish women over 80 in a single county in Northwestern Vermont who self-identify as aging successfully.

**Approach:** This study has a phenomenological approach.

**Method:** Phenomenological interviews were conducted with five women over 80 years of age. Interview content was analyzed, and shared themes were synthesized.

**Findings:** Findings revealed the following shared themes: acknowledgement of extraordinary quality of life events and/or circumstances, extensive and ongoing social involvement with communities and/or individuals, and strong sense of self.

**Conclusions:** The lived experiences of participants who self-identified as aging successfully were characterized by gratitude for the lives they led and continue to lead, extensive and ongoing communal and interpersonal social engagement, and high levels of self-esteem and self-knowledge.

**Implications for practice:** Interventions focused on promoting gratitude, ongoing social engagement, and self-esteem/efficacy may improve individuals' chances of aging successfully; women over 80 respond positively given the opportunity to tell their story, and may benefit from affiliation with a religious community.

**Keywords:** successful aging; women; oldest old; community-dwelling; lived experience; Jewish

## **SUMMARY STATEMENT OF IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

### **What does this research add to existing knowledge in gerontology?**

- There is value in understanding the concept of successful aging as a subjective phenomenon that is the culmination of an individual's unique experiences and circumstances throughout his or her lifetime.
- Discrete populations of women over 80 who self-identify as aging successfully may share specific characteristics including (but not limited to) lived experiences, circumstances, values, beliefs, and/or personality traits.

### **What are the implications of this new knowledge for nursing care with older people?**

- Interventions focused on promoting gratitude, ongoing social engagement, and self-esteem/efficacy throughout the lifetime may improve individuals' chances of aging successfully.
- Advanced practice nurses may find that giving community-dwelling women over 80 ample opportunity to tell their stories will lead to the development of rapport conducive to productive and therapeutic provider-patient relationships.
- Irrespective of level of observance and/or religiousness, community-dwelling women over 80 may benefit socially from affiliation with a religious community; interest in such should be explored and/or discussed with individuals as applicable.

### **How could the findings be used to influence policy or practice or research or education?**

- Additional small-scale, in-depth qualitative studies involving people over 80 need to be undertaken in order to explore and enhance understanding of successful aging as a highly personal subjective phenomenon.
- Further research needs to be undertaken to determine what factors throughout the lifetime are most strongly associated with successful aging in women over 80 who self-identify as being shy and/or introverted, as well as other specific populations of women over 80 distinct from the population examined in this study.
- Principles of the phenomenological approach should be integrated into gerontology nursing curricula, specifically with regard to aspects of provider-patient interaction such as interviewing and therapeutic relationship development.

## BACKGROUND

The primary aim of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experience of a small group of community-dwelling Jewish women over 80 living in a single county in Northwestern Vermont who self-identify as aging successfully. Small-scale, in-depth qualitative studies examining the lived experience of specific populations of older people are illuminating and useful because findings inform and expand theoretical understanding of successful aging among unique groups, ultimately guiding practice and research activities in nursing and health-related disciplines (Futrell, Wondolowski, & Mitchell, 1993; Jonsen, Norberg, & Lundman, 2015; Lewis, 2011).

Aging is a fundamental part of the human experience. It is difficult to ignore the phenomenon of aging, particularly in industrialized nations. In the United States, the population of people over 80 is significant and only projected to increase. As of 2013, nearly 6 million people over 85 years of age lived in the US, with women outnumbering men at a ratio of 195.9 women for every 100 men. The population of people over 85 is projected to rise to 14.6 million in 2040, over double the population accounted for in 2013 ('Aging Statistics,' n.d.). Given these numbers, a robust scholarly interest in the topic of successful aging is warranted. Numerous models exist to define the concept of successful aging, with conceptualizations ranging from the strictly biomedical to the psychosocial, as well as lay models emphasizing life-satisfaction and well-being (Cosco, Prina, Perales, Stephan, & Brayne, 2014).

Interest in successful aging is notable in numerous disciplines, including nursing, medicine, and the social sciences (Brandt, Deindl, & Hank, 2012; Cheng, 2014; Cosco,

Prina, Perales, Stephan, & Brayne, 2014; Jeste, Savla, Thompson, Vahia, Glorioso, Martin, Palmer, Rock, Golshan, Kraemer, & Depp, 2013; Martin, Kelly, Kahana, Kahana, Willcox, Willcox, & Poon, 2015; Nimrod & Ben-Shem, 2015; Rowe & Kahn, 1997; Romo, Wallhagen, Yorman, Yeung, Christie, Eng, Micco, Perez-Stable, Eliseo, & Smith, 2013; Stowe & Cooney, 2015). Even considering this well-established interest, small-scale, in-depth qualitative studies examining the lived experience of people over 80 are relatively rare. As illustrated in the opening paragraph, the current US population of women over 80 vastly outnumbers its male counterpart, so in terms of numbers alone, women over 80 – particularly those who self-identify as successful agers – are a population worthy of closer, and more subtle, examination.

Learning more about the lived experience of specific groups of women over 80 who self-identify as successful agers has the potential to not only enhance the nature and quality of care provided to particular populations, but could also serve a larger, more vital purpose: answering the question of whether or not specific life experiences and/or characteristics might predict or indicate how successfully a woman will age.

### **Why Jewish Women Over 80?**

Full disclosure: I am a Jewish woman, and I have in my life the pleasure of knowing and interacting with older, wiser Jewish women. My scholarly interest is also quite personal in nature; what can I learn – as a Jewish woman – that might allow me to age successfully? What knowledge will I pass on to my own daughters? It is not possible to separate these personal concerns from my scholarly and professional ones: what, as an advanced practice nurse and researcher, should I promote and implement across the life



cycle to imbue my patients with the best opportunity to age successfully? By examining the lived experience of a small population of active, dynamic, community-dwelling Jewish women over 80, I hope to begin answering these questions.

I believe that researcher interest has the potential to render a population worthy of scholarly interest, particularly when combined with both a notable lack of comparable studies, as well as the nature of qualitative inquiry within the nursing discipline. An extensive review of the current and past nursing literature yielded not a single study examining the lived experience of Jewish women over 80. Beck (1994) stated that ‘because nursing is primarily a social act between nurse and client, phenomenological perspective can help increase nurses' understanding of their clients by entering into their lifeworld’ (p. 508). Keeping this in mind, a central aim of this phenomenological study is to illuminate the lived experience of a relatively unexplored population for the purpose of increasing understanding.

### **Purpose of Study and Research Question**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to reveal individual and collective themes characterizing the lived experience of community-dwelling Jewish women over 80 living in a single county in Northwestern Vermont who self-identify as aging successfully. The value of developing an enhanced understanding of this unique population of women is multifold. First, the results of the study will add to the body of research dedicated to understanding and conceptualizing successful aging as a highly personal subjective phenomenon. Secondly, conclusions that emerge as the result of the study have the potential to guide research and practice in nursing and other health-related

disciplines with regard to the population of interest as well as other comparable populations. Finally, gaining an understanding of the themes that characterize the lived experience of this population might reveal deeper awareness of what exactly it is throughout the course of a lifetime that allows women to progress, with a meaningful measure of joy, grace, and dignity, to 80 years and beyond. The research question is: what themes characterize the lived experience of community-dwelling Jewish women over 80 in Chittenden County, Vermont, who self-identify as aging successfully?

### **Review of Literature**

One of the most widely accepted models for measuring successful aging is Rowe and Kahn's model (1997), which allows observers to differentiate between usual versus successful aging based on a set of objective criteria. One criticism of Rowe and Kahn's model is its focus on physiological measures to the exclusion of psychosocial components, and its lack of a subjective component for measuring successful aging (Martin et al., 2015). Cheng (2014) points out that to define successful aging based on a set of objective, researcher-driven standards ignores other potentially pertinent measures such as cognitive, psychological, and social functioning, as well as purely subjective lay measures such as self-rating, and thus fails to capture the complexity of the process. Evidence suggests the validity of self-rating as a meaningful outcome measure worthy of incorporating into conceptualizations of successful aging (Jeste et al., 2013), as well as the idea that people may self-identify as aging successfully in spite of disability or worsening physical and cognitive functioning (Jeste et al., 2013; Romo et al., 2013).

Another criticism of Rowe and Kahn's model is its narrow focus on late adulthood as a point to make a fixed assessment of successful aging rather than viewing it as a dynamic lifelong process. Integrating what Stowe and Cooney (2015) describe as a 'life course' perspective into conceptualizations of successful aging could enrich understanding of the phenomenon by acknowledging the diverse array of personal and social influences that contribute to aging over a lifetime. For example, Brandt et al. (2012) determined that successful aging is a dynamic phenomenon deeply rooted in lived experience. Similarly Nimrod and Ben-Shem (2015) found that participants consider successful aging to be a positive outcome of a lifelong process characterized by positive decision making earlier in life, resilience, and coping with change and loss.

The core components of Rowe and Kahn's model (decreased probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity and, active engagement with life) indicate an older person's overall level of wellness (1997). However, wellness at a fixed point in time is likely just one component of successful aging. In order to develop a holistic view of successful aging, it may be useful to examine the lived experience of people who identify as aging successfully. By examining and meticulously interpreting the lived experience of individuals, researchers can uncover and begin to understand the underlying structure of the phenomenon of interest (Kleiman, 2004), successful aging in this case.

Although small-scale, in-depth qualitative studies examining the lived experience of people over 80 are uncommon in the literature of numerous disciplines, such studies exist, and offer insight into the experience of aging within culturally and/or

geographically specific contexts. Lewis's 2011 study examining successful aging from the perspective of 26 Alaska Natives between ages 61 and 93 uncovered four 'core elements' of 'Eldership,' which included 'emotional well-being' and 'community engagement' (p. 545-546). Jonsen, Norberg, and Lundman's 2015 study, which assessed perceptions of meaning in life for ten people between ages 85 and 95 living in a small community in northern Sweden, uncovered distinct 'themes' (synonymous with Lewis's core elements) including 'living in connection with others and nature' and 'seeing oneself as a link between generations' (p. 224 -225). In a 1993 phenomenological study examining aging among community-dwelling people over 80 in one coastal town in Scotland, Futrell, Wondolowski, and Mitchell also uncovered common themes among participants including 'transfigurations signifying maturity' and 'tempering the unavoidable with buoyant serenity' (p. 191).

The three above-mentioned studies are similar in that the researcher(s) in each case synthesized distinct shared themes among participants, indicating that culturally and/or geographically specific groups of older individuals share insights, experiences, values, and/or characteristics. Such findings are compelling and useful, as understanding of the shared themes or elements uniting a population of older people might inform nurses and other health care professionals how best to approach members of said population in terms of care provision, wellness promotion, and health-related interventions. All three studies also strengthen the case for understanding aging as a unique, nuanced, and highly personal phenomenon requiring rigorous qualitative inquiry as a means for facilitating deeper understanding.

As previously noted, an extensive review of the current and past nursing literature yielded not a single study examining the lived experience of Jewish women over 80. However, the few studies that I discovered from other disciplines – anthropology and social work, respectively – offer a great deal of insight into the lives of the research participants, both as individuals and populations. In one study, the researcher analyzed transcripts of 30 American Jewish women over 80 in order to better understand how the participants experienced and perceived suffering during their lifetimes (Rubinstein, 2009). The researcher discovered several themes upon analysis, including ‘a general lack of direct reference to the holocaust as the exemplar of personal suffering,’ ‘reviewing life and encountering the end of life,’ and ‘suffering as a cultural construct’ (p. 125). Conclusions not only illuminated the nature of suffering among the participants, but also to increased understanding of the participants as a population.

In a 2002 study, which focused on a women's issues group consisting of single Jewish women in their 80s and 90s sharing ‘a desire to understand, learn and discuss sexuality in the context of their personal histories, their aging, their Judaism, and their current lifestyle,’ the researcher - who was also the group leader - explored participant's characteristics and interactions, as well as recurring themes connected to their self-perception and sexuality (David, p. 50-51). Observations concerning participant’s respective backgrounds and life experiences served to enhance and add depth to the subject matter presented in the article.

## METHODS

### Approach

This study has a phenomenological approach. As a novice phenomenological researcher, I based my methodology on an article by Thomas Groenewald, A *Phenomenological Research Design Illustrated* (2004), which synthesized core principles of phenomenological research design and illustrated the methodology using concrete examples of each step.

### Participant Recruitment

A purposive sample of five women was included in the study. In order to be considered, potential participants had to fulfill the inclusion criteria shown in Table 1. Initial participants were recruited with the aid of *key insiders*, individuals having relationships with potential participants who volunteer assistance (Groenewald, 2004). In the study, two rebbetzins (Rabbi's wives) affiliated with an orthodox Hassidic Jewish movement known for outreach and education served as key insiders. They were selected because of their well-established relationships with a diverse array older Jewish women in Chittenden County, Vermont. Key insiders engaged Jewish women who, in addition to fitting the inclusion criteria, were known to be measurably active, independent, and socially engaged to increase the chances of recruiting participants who self-identify as aging successfully. Once key insiders established potential participants' interest, they were given the researcher's contact information. Contact was initiated by potential participants. Snowball sampling was employed to recruit additional participants (Groenewald, 2004).

## **Ethical Considerations**

The study was approved by the Internal Review Board of the University of Vermont (CHRBSS# 16-587). Prior to consenting, both participants and key insiders were informed of the voluntary nature of participation, and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity in the presentation of the study findings.

## **Interviews**

Phenomenological interviews were conducted with all participants. Each interview began with the following prompt: *Please, tell me about who you are, and describe some of your experiences that brought you to where you are today.* Interviews took place in participants' homes in order to maximize their comfort, and no additional parties were present during the interviews (although participants were offered the option of having another person present to promote a sense of safety). Interviews generally lasted from one to two hours, and were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two key insiders to gain additional insight into the population represented by the participant sample. The types of questions utilized during these interviews are shown in Table 2. Key insider interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes, and were transcribed verbatim by the researcher

## **Data Storing and Protection Methods**

I utilized a professional interview recording application on a smartphone device to audio-record all interviews with the permission of interviewees. Once completed, interviews were transferred to a password-protected computer for transcription. Each participant/key insider was assigned an alphanumeric code as well as a pseudonym

(typically chosen by participant/key insider herself) for electronic and paper documentation.

### **Data Explication Methods**

I utilized a simplified version of Hycner's (1999) (cited by Groenewald, 2004) data explication process for phenomenological interview analysis. Explanations of the phases of this method as applicable to this study are shown in Table 3.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Participant Characteristics**

Participant demographic information is shown in Table 4. Note that the names appearing in Table 4 and subsequent sections are pseudonyms. This was done to protect participant anonymity.

Participants were not asked directly if they consider themselves to be aging successfully. I chose rather to task key insiders with recruiting participants who are active, independent, and socially engaged, and to allow participants' self-identification as successful agers to emerge spontaneously in conversations leading up to the interviews, as well as during and after the interviews themselves. Four of the five participants expressed contentedness with regard their current quality of life on numerous occasions, while generally not referencing limitations or disappointments. Robin, 86, stated 'I'm pretty independent. And I'm not afraid of tomorrow. I don't just live for today. I've got a lot going on. I look forward to things.' Similarly, Genevieve, 85, stated 'I'm in very good health . . . and every day when I get up in the morning, and put my feet on the floor, and



have no aches and pains, I'm grateful, and it's another day.' Only one participant, Janis, 84, repeatedly expressed recognition of a decline in her quality of life corresponding to increasing age. When questioned if she is still playing mahjong, her favorite hobby, she stated 'I haven't done that for a while . . . and for me to give up mahjong, that's a big thing, because I love the game. But anyway, life is good. I say thank God.'

The three most significant shared themes characterizing the lived experience of the participants – 1) acknowledgement of extraordinary quality of life events and/or circumstances, 2) extensive and ongoing social involvement with communities and/or individuals, and 3) strong sense of self – are presented below.

### **Acknowledgement of Extraordinary Quality of Life Events and/or Circumstances**

I derived this theme from subthemes characterizing the lived experience of all five participants. Subthemes included 1) recognition of and gratitude for quality of life, 2) joyful contentedness regarding life's proceedings and/or circumstances, and 3) recurring sense of awe, wonderment, and/or amazement regarding life events or circumstances. Throughout the course of their respective interviews, each participant acknowledged on numerous occasions the extraordinary quality of the events or circumstances characterizing their lives, both past and present. When reflecting on moving from New Jersey to Vermont to attend college, Elinor, 84, stated 'so actually, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. I was here in Vermont, it was just beautiful. And I loved school, and I felt really secure as a Jewish student.' Of her current circumstances, Elinor stated 'I had a really good ride, I feel well.' Sarah, 91, variously stated 'I had a wonderful childhood,' 'in college, I had a wonderful time,' and 'it's been a lovely life,' and Janis, who grew up

in a lower-middle class Brooklyn neighborhood during the depression, stated ‘[I] don’t ever remember not having anything, but I think it was because nobody had anything more than I did . . . I don’t remember any trials or tribulations.’ Genevieve, when reflecting on her life in its entirety, stated ‘I have no regrets in my life, none. And it’s terrible, I shouldn’t say that because it’s egotistical, but it’s not. I just feel as if my life has been good, from the beginning to the [present].’

### **Extensive and Ongoing Social Involvement with Communities and/or Individuals**

I derived this theme from subthemes characterizing the lived experience of four of five participants. Subthemes included 1) social interaction and extensive involvement in relationships, friendships, and communities and 2) developing friendships and relationships with a diverse variety of individuals. The four participants sharing this theme led lives characterized by extensive interaction with individuals and communities, and continue to be socially and civically active. Robin, who no longer drives, is proud to have received rides from 146 different people in the community, most of whom she considers friends or acquaintances. She attends weekly education groups, goes to synagogue every Friday evening, and recently participated in the Moth, an organization that presents storytelling events across the United States and abroad (‘The Story Behind the Stories,’ n.d.). Elinor has been involved with her synagogue since her children were young. She served as the first female president of the congregation in the mid-1980s, and continues to write a monthly newsletter for the synagogue today, in addition to planning events and attending weekly services. She also volunteers for Meals on Wheels. Genevieve expressed consternation regarding plans to travel abroad; she is so inundated

with various social and civic commitments, she may have to reschedule a trip to visit friends in Europe. Sarah, who is very active in her synagogue, reflected on her long-standing ability to make friends with different types of people when she stated ‘I – number one – I mixed with non-Jewish boys and girls.’

### **Strong Sense of Self**

I derived this theme from subthemes characterizing the lived experience of four of five participants. Subthemes included 1) independence, outgoingness, and individuality and 2) self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and self-possessiveness. The four participants sharing this theme expressed values, actions, and attitudes indicative of knowing and trusting their selves without regard to outside perspectives or conventions. For example, Robin did not marry until she was 40 years old, and never considered having children, a stance that was certainly unconventional for a woman experiencing early adulthood in the 1950s. Robin also started college at the age of 30, and had a bat mitzvah ten days before her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. Elinor, who was one of the only students from her high school to apply to college, embarked on this process unencumbered by the conventions of the time period. She recalled receiving a polite rejection letter from Dartmouth College, which explained that they were not accepting female applicants; it simply never occurred to her not to apply. Perhaps the most literal expression of having a strong sense of self came from Genevieve, whose parents divorced when she was 16 years old. Reflecting on the divorce, she stated ‘Even though I knew it was a [shameful event], it was a terrible thing for Jewish people to get divorced, I was me, and I just lived my life in a way that people knew it was me.’

## DISCUSSION

Based on phenomenological interviews conducted with five community dwelling Jewish women over 80 in Chittenden County, Vermont, the most significant shared themes characterizing participants' lived experience were: 1) acknowledgement of extraordinary quality of life events and/or circumstances, 2) extensive and ongoing social involvement with communities and/or individuals, and 3) strong sense of self. Four of five participants strongly self-identified as aging successfully, with the notable exception of Janis, the only participant who repeatedly expressed recognition of a decline in her quality of life corresponding to increasing age. Interestingly, Janis was the only participant whose individual subthemes did not factor into the second or third most significant shared themes (extensive and ongoing social involvement with communities and/or individuals and strong sense of self).

The first theme, acknowledgement of extraordinary quality of life events and/or circumstances, was interpreted as expressions of gratitude for both lives led as well as the lives participants continue to lead. Several studies illustrate a correlation between gratitude and psychological well-being in older people. Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, and Ruch (2013) found that participants who participated in 'gratitude visits' – an intervention in which participants write a letter and deliver it to the person to whom they wish to express gratitude – showed significant improvements in happiness when compared to a placebo control group. In a similar quantitative study, Ramírez, Ortega, Chamorro, and Colmenero (2014) determined that participants aged 60 to 93 who followed a positive psychology program including gratitude and forgiveness showed

decreased anxiety and depression compared to a placebo group. Qualitative studies have also yielded connections between gratitude and well-being in older individuals. Armour (2010) discovered that Holocaust survivors were able to make sense of and/or find benefit from traumatic experiences by 'cultivating proactive attitudes,' which included expressions of gratitude. The researcher stated that, for participants, practicing gratitude 'may have reduced a possible sense of victimization, because having a grateful spirit tended to produce humility and satisfaction by keeping the focus on what survivors had now' (p. 455). Similarly, Todorova, Guzzardo, Adams, and Falcón (2015) found 'gratitude for the health one has' in spite of declining health, to be a prevalent theme characterizing the experience of Puerto Rican adults aged 45 to 75.

The second theme, extensive and ongoing social involvement with communities and/or individuals, was interpreted as active past, present, and ongoing engagement at both the communal and interpersonal levels. A significant body of literature describes the benefits of social interaction and/or community involvement for older women (e.g. Herrera, Meeks, Dawes, Hernandez, Thompson, Sommerfeld, Allison, & Jeste, 2011; Nagalingam, 2007; Stark-Wroblewski, Edelbaum, & Bello, 2008; Shenk, Zablotzky, & Croom, 1998). The four participants whose individual subthemes factored into this shared theme displayed certain personality traits (e.g. extroversion, outgoingness), which are almost certainly associated with higher levels of communal and interpersonal involvement. In an extensive literature review, Eaton, Krueger, South, Gruenewald, Seeman, and Roberts (2012) argued that personality traits such as extroversion may be important predictors of positive health patterns contributing to successful aging. When

asked what they think contributes most to the experience of Jewish women over 80 aging successfully, both key insiders identified community involvement and specific personality traits as significant contributors. One key insider stated, '[Jewish women over 80] who want to be part of the community and volunteer, and create friends and keep friends and do things with their friends, they seem to be thriving' and 'they are very upbeat. Wherever you go, they're there . . . they want to see the people, and they want to socialize, and they want to learn, they want to grow.'

Several participants who did not identify as being religious or observant characterized their experience of Judaism in terms of communal involvement, and identified this as the aspect of Judaism they value most. Both key insiders spoke emphatically about Jewish communal involvement as a significant contributor to women over 80 aging successfully. One key insider stated, 'I think the [Jewish community] keeps them going and keeps them involved. It really motivates them to get out and keep doing things.' Several participants corroborated this statement within the context of their interviews, describing their respective synagogues and Jewish communities as the hubs of their extensive social and community involvement.

The third theme, strong sense of self, was interpreted as high levels of self-knowledge or self-esteem. Sense of self is a concept referring to a person's belief about himself or herself, or self-knowledge (Baumeister, 1999). Individuals who have a weak sense of self may lack a sense of identity, or who they are (Ickes, Park, & Johnson, 2012). On the contrary, individuals possessing a strong sense of self may possess a strong sense of identity, as well as a healthy self-esteem. Several studies from the contemporary

nursing literature have demonstrated the benefits of high self-esteem/strong sense of self with regard to successful aging. Nam Hyun, Eun Ju, and Sohyune (2012) determined that self-esteem is the major predictor of successful aging among Korean adults over age 60, along with self-achievement, interpersonal relationships, and self-efficacy. A separate group of Korean researchers (Boon Han, Ji Eun, Joon Ah, Jin Hui, & Min Su, 2015) also found self-esteem to be the most significant predictive factor associated with successful aging among 136 participants aged 65 to 85. The results of several other studies illustrate the correlation between high self-esteem/strong sense of self and successful aging (e.g., Kaplan, Huguet, Orpana, Feeny, McFarland, & Ross, 2008; Wiesmann & Hannich, 2008).

In considering the theme strong sense of self as a unifying theme among the four participants who self-identified as aging successfully, it is worth considering factors contributing to an older person's self-esteem. At least two of the studies mentioned above identified self-efficacy as a significant predictor of successful aging (Nam Hyun et al., 2012; Wiesmann & Hannich, 2008). Bandura (1997) defines self-efficacy as a belief in one's personal capabilities. It stands to reason that high self-efficacy may be a precursor to high self-esteem. If someone believes in his or her personal capabilities, and this belief is reinforced by actions (such as maintaining independence), a person is more likely to have high self-esteem and a strong sense of self. When asked about characteristics of the population of women over 80 in Chittenden County, Vermont, who seem to be aging successfully, both key insiders alluded to high self-efficacy as a defining characteristic. One key insider stated, 'I don't think these [women] even like to rely on too many people

. . . they prefer to do it themselves, which is also a very good thing because they feel like they're independent.' The same key insider described the women's appearances as another defining characteristic: '[These women] are buying new clothes, and they're dressing nicely, and they're putting on makeup and fixing their hair and doing their nails. It makes them feel good.' It is possible to view this as another allusion to self-esteem, or sense of self. Despite their older age, these women still desire to take care in their grooming and physical appearances.

### **Methodological considerations**

According to Kvale (1996) (cited by Groenewald, 2004), the role of the researcher in the unstructured phenomenological interview is to 'understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold meaning of peoples' experiences' (p. 13). To this end, I allowed interviews with participants to unfold organically and spontaneously, listened actively to participants, and engaged when necessary to gain clarification or enhanced understanding of their experiences, feelings, beliefs, and values. Interviews took place in the participant's homes in order to ensure a warm, open, comfortable environment. Possibly owing to this approach, during each interview a rapport developed between myself and the participants. More specifically, participants responded to the opportunity to tell their stories by becoming increasingly engaged, animated, and relaxed, which led to richer interactions between myself and the participants. I left each interview with a distinct impression that a relationship had been established.

Determination of participants' self-identification as aging successfully was not a quantitative process; there is no tool or model currently available to measure successful



aging. In order to make this determination, I carefully discussed the concept of successful aging with key insiders, and encouraged them to recruit individuals who were known to be measurably active, independent, and socially engaged to increase the chances of recruiting participants who self-identify as aging successfully. I also employed my own judgment in determining participants' self-identification as aging successfully based on our extensive, one-on-one interaction. This lack of a quantifiable process to determine participants' self-identification as aging successfully can be seen as a limitation.

This study included a small, relatively homogenous sample of participants not representative of the general population, therefore the findings have limited generalizability. An element of self-selection bias invariably contributed to the findings. The women who agreed to participate in this study volunteered of their own volition and initiated contact with the researcher, actions almost certainly associated with more extroverted and outgoing personality types. This should not in any way indicate that more introverted individuals possess less ability to age successfully. Inherent limitations, should not detract from the insights uncovered throughout the course of this study.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The five women who participated in this study were able to discuss their lived experiences by drawing on notable memories and expressing their unique values, feelings, and personal beliefs. On multiple occasions during their interviews, all five participants expressed gratitude for the lives they have led and continue to lead by

acknowledging the extraordinary quality of the events and/or circumstances characterizing their lived experiences. Four of the five participants have led and continue to lead lives characterized by extensive communal and interpersonal social engagement, and share certain personality traits (outgoingness and extroversion) associated with ongoing social and community involvement. Four of the five women who participated in this study described events and expressed values, feelings, and personal beliefs indicating high levels of self-esteem and self-knowledge. The four participants sharing in this theme also live very independently, and possess physical and psychological capacities conducive to leading active, engaged, and independent lives. Several Participants who did not identify as being religious or observant identified communal involvement as being the aspect of Judaism they most value, and viewed their religious communities as important hubs of social interaction. Participants responded very positively to the opportunity to tell their stories, and rapport developed between the researcher and the participants as a result.

## **PRACTICE AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS**

- Interventions focused on promoting gratitude, ongoing social engagement, and self-esteem/efficacy throughout the lifetime may improve individuals' chances of aging successfully.
- Advanced practice nurses may find that giving community-dwelling women over 80 ample opportunity to tell their stories will lead to the development of rapport conducive to productive and therapeutic provider-patient relationships.

- Irrespective of level of observance and/or religiousness, community-dwelling women over 80 may benefit socially from affiliation with a religious community; interest in such should be explored and/or discussed with individuals as applicable.
- Additional small-scale, in-depth qualitative studies involving people over 80 need to be undertaken in order to explore and enhance understanding of successful aging as a highly personal subjective phenomenon.
- Further research needs to be undertaken to determine what factors throughout the lifetime are most strongly associated with successful aging in women over 80 who self-identify as being shy and/or introverted, as well as other specific populations of women over 80 distinct from the population examined in this study.
- Principles of the phenomenological approach should be integrated into gerontology nursing curricula, specifically with regard to aspects of provider-patient interaction such as interviewing and therapeutic relationship development.

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## TABLES

**Table 1.** Inclusion criteria for potential participants

1. Participants must self-identify as being female
2. Participants must be over the age of 80
3. Participants must currently self-identify as being Jewish. Specific characteristics, such as participation in Jewish rituals and holidays, affiliation with a local synagogue or Jewish community, ethnic background, or level of religiosity will not be considered. Women who converted to Judaism at some point during their lives will be equally considered as potential participants
4. Participants must be community-dwelling, which excludes individuals who live in institutions such as nursing homes or assisted living facilities. Women who live in communities for older people will be equally considered, as will women who live with family members
5. Participants must live in Chittenden County, a county in Northwestern Vermont
6. Participants must not have current diagnoses and/or signs/symptoms of dementia

**Table 2.** Sample questions for semi-structured key insider interviews

- In your experience, what do you think contributes most the experience of Jewish women over 80 aging successfully?
- What role do you think Judaism plays in the experience of successful aging of Jewish women over 80?
- What do you think might cause a Jewish women over the age of 80 to age unsuccessfully?
- As a Jewish woman, what do you think is necessary in your own life to allow you to eventually age successfully?

**Table 3.** Data explication process for phenomenological interview analysis

**Phase 1: Bracketing and phenomenological reduction.** During this stage, I set aside my own presuppositions in order to gain as subjective a position as possible with regard to the unique viewpoint of the participant. This phase involved listening to the audio recording of each interview repeatedly in order to gain a sense of the overall tone, or gestalt. The processes of writing field notes and transcribing the interviews contributed a great deal to this phase of explication.

**Phase 2: Delineating units of meaning.** During this stage, I extracted statements that were grasped as elucidating or illuminating the phenomenon of interest. I composed lists of units of meaning for each interview, and carefully examined them for redundancy.

**Phase 3: Clustering of units of meaning to form themes.** During this stage, I examined the lists of units of meaning from each interview, and – after once more bracketing presuppositions in order remain true to the phenomenon of interest – grouped them together into clusters. Next, I attempted to derive meaning from the clusters, which were translated into central themes.

**Phase 4: Summarizing each interview, validating and modifying where necessary.** At this point, I contacted the participants to determine if the essence of the interview was correctly captured. Modifications were made as necessary.

**Phase 5: Extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary.** Once the first four phases had been applied to each interview, I examined the explicated data as a whole in order to determine if there were themes common to most or all of the interviews.

**Table 4.** Participant demographic information

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Living arrangement</b> | <b>Marital status</b> | <b>Highest level of education achieved</b> | <b>Birth state</b> |
|--------------------|------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|--|--------------------|
| Robin              | 86         | Apartment                 | Widowed               | Bachelor's degree                          | New Jersey         |
| Janis              | 84         | Apartment                 | Widowed               | High school diploma                        | New York           |
| Elinor             | 81         | House                     | Married               | Bachelor's degree                          | New Jersey         |
| Sarah              | 91         | House                     | Widowed               | Bachelor's degree                          | Vermont            |
| Genevieve          | 85         | House                     | Married               | Bachelor's degree                          | New Jersey         |

**Table 5.** Shared themes characterizing the lived experience of participants

| <b>Theme</b>   | <b>Number of participants sharing theme</b> |
|--|---|
| Acknowledgement of extraordinary quality of life events and/or circumstances | 5 of 5                                      |
| Extensive and ongoing social involvement with communities and/or individuals | 4 of 5                                      |
| Strong sense of self   | 4 of 5                                      |
| Optimism and resilience  | 3 of 5                                      |
| Joyful interaction with children   | 3 of 5                                      |
| Identification with cultural and communal aspects of Judaism                 | 3 of 5                                      |

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