

**Exploring the Social Meaning of Aging and of  
Neighbourhood Programs and Facilities for  
Older Residents:  
Ethnographic Accounts from Vancouver**

by

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B.A., University of Victoria, 2006

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates a neglected aspect of the emerging social and professional concern with the demographic trend toward an aging population. Specifically, it examines some commonly encountered discursive assumptions about the capacities and requirements of adults aged 65 and older and considers potential difficulties involved in relying upon these to guide thinking about how to provide for the needs of people in this age category. The second part of the project presents the findings from ethnographic interviews conducted with 13 seniors (aged 65 years and over) who reside within Vancouver neighbourhoods. These findings provide detailed accounts of individuals' daily lives and how they perceive and meet their social needs both within and beyond the confines of organized neighbourhood programs and facilities. These accounts are then analyzed to assess the degree to which the lived experiences and expressed needs of these individuals align with discursive representations of the lifestyles of seniors, representations that figure in academic accounts and the discursive statements of various organizations that attempt to speak and act on behalf of older adults. In allowing participants to speak for themselves, this study both complicates and enriches our understanding of an often taken-for-granted or 'spoken about' category of people by highlighting variation between individuals. The research findings suggest a need to consider ways in which assumptions used to inform policy and planning for categories of people are made and the importance of ongoing inclusion of persons aged 65 and older in dialogues concerning them.

**Keywords:** Aging; seniors' programming; discourse analysis; ethnography; Vancouver

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# Table of Contents

Approval.....	ii
Partial Copyright Licence .....	iii
Ethics Statement.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
Acknowledgements .....	vi
Table of Contents.....	vii
<b>Chapter 1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2. Literature Review.....</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1. Discourse and Discourse Analysis.....	4
2.2. Constructing Aging as a Public Problem.....	6
2.3. Aging, Identity and the Life Course Perspective (Social Theories of Aging).....	8
2.4. Aging in Place and the Significance of Neighbourhood.....	11
2.5. Age-Friendly Movement.....	13
<b>Chapter 3. Methodology.....</b>	<b>15</b>
3.1. Interviews .....	16
3.1.1. Posted Advertisements.....	16
3.1.2. Personal Contacts and Third Party Referral.....	16
<b>Chapter 4. Public and Organizational Knowledge of Aging: Policy Makers and Program Providers .....</b>	<b>19</b>
4.1. Policymakers .....	20
4.1.1. Federal level.....	20
4.1.2. Government of British Columbia .....	21
4.1.3. City of Vancouver .....	22
Age-Friendly Action Plan .....	22
4.2. Neighbourhood Organizations Serving Seniors .....	23
<b>Chapter 5. Expert Knowledge of Aging: Academic Research .....</b>	<b>28</b>
5.1. Characterizing Old Age.....	28
5.2. Aging Well .....	29
5.3. The Role of Social, Recreational and Leisure Activities .....	30
5.4. Seniors Centres.....	31
5.5. Other Ways of Thinking about Active Aging.....	34
5.6. Summary.....	34
<b>Chapter 6. Research Findings .....</b>	<b>36</b>
6.1. Participant Profiles.....	36

6.2. Classifying Oldness .....	43
6.3. Challenges in Aging.....	44
6.3.1. Activities become more difficult.....	45
6.3.2. Not driving/relying on transit .....	46
6.3.3. Going out at Night.....	46
6.3.4. Money .....	47
6.3.5. Loss of friends, family and social life.....	48
6.3.6. Living Alone.....	50
6.3.7. Close Friendships.....	51
6.3.8. Difficulty Making Friends.....	52
6.3.9. Summary of Challenges .....	53
6.4. Taking Initiative.....	54
6.5. Organized Programs and Activities.....	57
6.5.1. Social Leveraging and The Strength of Weak Ties .....	60
6.6. Unstructured Activity.....	63
6.7. Volunteer Work.....	66
6.8. Motivation .....	68
6.9. Maintaining Distance .....	69
6.10. Feeling Busy, Feeling Satisfied.....	71
<b>Chapter 7. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>79</b>
Appendix Interview Guide.....	86

# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

The World Health Organization has stated that “population aging and urbanization are two global trends that together comprise major forces shaping the 21st century” (WHO, 2007: 6). The situation in Canada reflects this overall trend. Though at different rates provincially, the seniors demographic is increasing nationwide, with individuals aged 65 and over constituting the fastest growing segment of the population. Numbering approximately one in seven Canadians in 2011, the proportion of those aged 65 and over is expected to reach nearly one quarter by the year 2036 (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2013). This shift has a number of economic, political and social implications for society, from a redefined labour market, to shifts in the kinds of housing and other arrangements needed to accommodate a changing population. Canadians aged 65 and over are largely concentrated in large urban centres (Statistics Canada, 2006), making this an important urban concern.

Urban areas possess distinct features and patterns, which may present opportunities or challenges to people as they grow older. Cities are often sites of rapid change – people move in and out, altering the demographic composition, while market driven growth and development (or decline) has wide-ranging repercussions for various aspects of urban life. In the Vancouver context, housing costs have increased exponentially, creating an affordability crisis. These factors, combined with the fact that familial and social networks may be more dispersed in cities, suggest that urban dwelling older adults may face special challenges in meeting needs.

These circumstances have not gone unnoticed. The attention given by government, academics, local program and service providers and others to various aspects of the aging phenomenon suggests a widespread belief that various measures

are needed to address it. Indeed, policies to meet the demands of an aging population are already being pursued, and are often underpinned by discourses suggesting that older adults are socially isolated, lonely, lacking roles that provide a sense of personal identity and so on. While a review and evaluation of such policies would be a worthwhile undertaking, it does not fall within the scope of this study.

What this research sets out to explore indirectly, is the degree of alignment between pervasive aging discourses – how older adults and their circumstances are commonly “seen” and articulated - and the actual circumstances, experiences and desires of a number of seniors<sup>1</sup> living on Vancouver’s West Side.<sup>2</sup> It does this by asking: 1) What are some of the general claims and assumptions about the nature and needs of older persons that are discursively featured in accounts from so-called “experts” (public, professional or academic)?; 2) How do some older individuals explain their own needs, activities and lifestyles – especially as related to the social and recreational aspects of their lives and with regard to programs and spaces purposely created for older adults; and, 3) What might be learned from a more detailed examination of the circumstances and experiences of these individual research participants that might prompt a re-evaluation of the claims and assumptions that commonly arise in academic and professional discourses concerning older adults?

Looking at the circumstances of a limited number of people allows them to be considered as individuals, rather than as members of a larger social category, whose presumed attributes may not reflect them accurately. It was important that the research capture individually held meanings and aspects of person’s lives that hold significance for them. Accordingly, an ethnographic approach was chosen for this study as it provides both the researcher and participants freedom to discuss a wide range of circumstances, uninhibited by assumptions, definitions, and “common knowledge” that when

<sup>1</sup> In this study the term “seniors” refers to individuals aged 65 and over. This is a common understanding of the term, though it is noted that other definitions and criteria are used elsewhere – including by some of the organizations considered in this research.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this study, the West Side denotes the area of Vancouver west of Ontario Street and bounded to the north and south by False Creek and the Fraser River, respectively. The West End is also included, due to the interest of one West End resident in participating and the feeling on the part of the researcher that this inclusion would not fundamentally alter the integrity of the study.

incorporated into methodology, can influence the way that participants respond and in turn, the consequence research findings. Each participant in this research represents only him- or herself, and this small number of participants is in no way meant to constitute a representative sample of persons aged 65 and over in Vancouver or anywhere else. Nevertheless, as real persons who match the criteria of a category, these individuals provide a basis from which to consider the potential limitations of commonly encountered assumptions about older adults. In doing this, it is possible to consider the degree to which this “common knowledge” of older adults might or might not be usefully and appropriately applied to thinking about whether and how to provide for this group.

Although intentionally limited in scope, this study makes a contribution to our understanding of aging, as this issue attracts greater attention from government, researchers and organizations grappling with how to address shifting demographic realities. If actions are to be addressed based on understandings of people as members of categories, then it is vital that those categories and associated attributes adequately describe the full range of people assigned to these. By examining the actual circumstances of particular individuals, the interviews conducted for this research provide a basis for making this kind of assessment.

## **Chapter 2.**

### **Literature Review**

This section will frame the study in terms of key theories about aging and associated relevant research. The first two bodies of literature are related; the first presents the notion of discourse and discourse analysis as an approach to social research. This provides a foundation for the next section, which considers the matter of how “public problems” come to be defined in these terms. This is linked to consideration of how aging too has been conceived as a “public problem” in various ways. A subsequent body of work explores ways in which the aging process and old age are understood and explained, exposing difficulties in pinning down these concepts. Next, focus shifts to the popular notion of “aging in place” and one of the settings commonly associated with this term – the neighbourhood. This part of the review helps to provide a rationale for the chosen research setting. A final section addresses the concept of “age-friendliness,” another term that has gained traction both in research and practical application, being adopted by governments and implemented through policy. Notably absent from this review of literature is a discussion of scholarly research pertaining to programs and leisure facilities for seniors. This omission is intentional, as it will be given special consideration in section five, entitled “Expert Knowledge of Aging: Academic Research.”

#### **2.1. Discourse and Discourse Analysis**

This study is about examining discourses as they relate to aging. Defined in different ways reflecting differing analytical approaches (Taylor, 2013), discourse can generally be understood as “the manner in which language and practice become routinized and externalized beyond the expressions of particular individuals and become, therefore, a common location for the standard generation of normative ideals

and sentiments” (Miller, 2001: 15). In other words, discourses can be imagined as vehicles by which ways of thinking become broadly adopted to inform what is commonly known or believed. In the academic sense, discourse is commonly understood as texts. However, discourse takes other forms; in addition to written and spoken language, it can include visual forms of communication such as images and symbols.

Words and language constitute the basis of communication and the primary medium by which individuals participate in society. These processes rely, to a certain extent, on shared meanings, which allow for efficient communication and understanding. Of course, consensus rarely exists and so discourses and meanings are multiple and contested. Nevertheless, some become more dominant than others and it is in this way that discourses can be thought to have influence and power. Some of the ways that discourses are commonly expressed are through media, public policies and announcements, and through organizational campaigns, public relations and promotional materials. While capable of reaching a wide audience, these higher profile, more public expressions of discourse can detract attention from other ways that discourses are routinely produced. In this regard, Miller (2001) has made an important contribution by highlighting the role of ordinary people in the discursive process. Noting the tendency to understand discourse in terms of an external pressure from a powerful actor that imposes itself on a passive recipient, he suggests that in the absence of discourses, people themselves actively pursue them; he uses the term “normative seeking” (Miller, 2001:16) to describe the way in which individuals look to develop discourses themselves or to receive them externally, from media and other sources. Further, Miller explains that the existence of a discourse – even a highly familiar discourse – does not automatically render it influential or powerful. He states that “sometimes discourse and often the normative is an expression of or the form taken by power...sometimes discourse is constitutive, but ... [sometimes discourses are] constitutive of little other than themselves” (Miller, 2001:16). This last statement gives implicit recognition to the agency of individuals in choosing how they relate to discourses.

Having established a basic understanding of discourse, discourse analysis, then, is defined by Taylor (2013) as “the close study of language and language use as

evidence of aspects of society and social life” (Taylor, 2013: 97), where “language” is broadly defined to include multiple ways of embodying and transferring meaning. As Taylor (2013) has shown through her succinct treatment of the topic, discourse analysis is an approach used to examine “collectively held meanings and collective practices” (Taylor, 2013: 81). Analysts are not interested in evaluating the truthfulness of claims, but rather the ways in which claims and meanings are established and widely embraced. In showing that these are products of processes of interpretation and social construction, space is created for previously unquestioned assumptions to be challenged (Taylor, 2013). This is one purpose of discourse analysis. Another is to gain practical information about individual experience (Taylor, 2013). Because discourses inherently simplify through generalization, discourse analysis can be undertaken to highlight complexity that is obscured through discursive processes. Discourse analysis looks beyond the face value of words and language (or other communication) and is interested in context and effect – what can the way we speak about things tell us about values, concerns, agendas and so forth? And what may be obscured or neglected as a result?

## **2.2. Constructing Aging as a Public Problem**

This study is premised on the observation that neighbourhood programs and facilities have been viewed and employed variously, as strategies to address the perceived issue of aging. However, this very perspective of aging – as something that should be addressed with action – is by no means inevitable. Rather, it can be understood as an outcome of a discursive process, which shapes the way that issues are seen and, potentially, acted upon.

Gerontologist Stephen Katz (2000) has written about the phenomenon whereby aspects of ordinary life undergo a process of “problematization.” He states that:

Problematizing practices discipline everyday life by transforming ordinary and sometimes arbitrary aspects of human existence – such as adjustment to retirement – into universal dilemmas that call for administrative and professional interventions buoyed by a politics of “thought” (Katz, 2000: 137).

The central concern of how some, but by no means all, issues or problems are elevated and take on public status, becoming widely regarded as things worthy of public action has been largely explored by sociologists working from a social constructionist perspective. A well-known example is Joseph Gusfield's (1981) study of drinking and driving, entitled *The Culture of Public Problems*. In the book's introduction, Gusfield presented social issues as dynamic in nature - conceived and emphasized differently at different points in time and in varying contexts. He maintained that particular groups have interests in "owning" or "disowning" problems, with some groups seeking and exercising greater control over how problems are defined, talked about, and understood. This, he argued, is significant because the way in which problems are defined affects the strategies considered for addressing them. It is important to note however, that "owners" of public problems do not necessarily possess exclusive control over the way that issues are publicly defined and may in fact "share" the work of defining problems (Schneider, 1985). Using the example of drinking and driving, Gusfield explained that this particular issue could be framed in multiple ways, including as a law enforcement issue, a public health issue or an issue belonging to the realm of transportation and urban planning; if viewed primarily as a law enforcement issue, the strategies for dealing with it would likely differ greatly than if viewed as an issue rooted in a poorly developed transportation network. Joseph Schneider has suggested that government agencies can be thought of as "social problems entrepreneurs" who market public problems, but require endorsement from other groups; in this regard, media can play a supporting role by contributing to the definition of social problems and their perceived viability, credibility and validity (Schneider 1985). Finally, the idea of "target populations" fits with Gusfield's conception of social problems. As described by Ingram and Schneider, target populations are socially constructed groups of people defined on the basis of shared (stereotypical) attributes who serve as the objects of policy (Ingram and Schneider, 1993).

Many commonly encountered discourses on aging suggest that it too can be conceived as a problem we ought to be doing something about, with older adults constituting a socially constructed target population. Observers looking on from an urban planning perspective have focused on mobility and accessibility issues. Politically, public figures and organizational entities try to show that they best understand and represent

the interests of seniors, who statistically tend to be motivated voters. As an example, the Province of British Columbia recently created the office of Seniors' Advocate. Economically, aging is viewed as creating financial strain on public welfare programs, including the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security. As a public health issue, it is framed in terms of over-burdened health care professionals, facilities and staff, unacceptable wait times, and poor quality of life stemming from unmet physical and emotional needs. Some of these types of concerns, when expressed in a negative and exaggerated way, have been termed "apocalyptic demography"<sup>3</sup> (Gee and Gutman, 2000). As Gee and Gutman argue, they lack empirical foundation, yet they have "taken hold in the minds of the public and policy-makers" (2000: 2). At the same time, they might take attention away from other dimensions of aging that deserve to be highlighted. A potentially overlooked implication of population aging raised by Barbara Mitchell's (2006) work on intergenerational relations and family, is how an aging population might impact younger generations of adults. For example, she notes that increased longevity might delay life transitions and add responsibility to younger seniors caring for aging parents. Conversely, trends among young generations (e.g., delaying permanent home-leaving, marriage and childbirth) are affecting older generations, who are in turn, supporting dependants longer and waiting longer to become grandparents. A rarely emphasized positive aspect of an aging population might be the continued presence of older family members, who contribute to family continuity and stability (Mitchell, 2006). All of these ways of seeing the "problem" are tied up with particular interests, and in aggregate hold potential to pursue vastly differing outcomes. Ways in which various dimensions of aging have been represented and treated as issues of concern will be further explored in later sections.

### **2.3. Aging, Identity and the Life Course Perspective (Social Theories of Aging)**

A study of aging necessarily begins with a consideration of the concepts of aging and old age. These are slippery terms that are frequently used, without agreement on

<sup>3</sup> Gee and Gutman's edited volume *The Overselling of Population Aging* provides a collection of chapters by different authors which address various aspects of this discursive trend.

their meanings and how they are understood, experienced and “owned” (or not) by those to whom they are commonly applied. Age 65 has been commonly used to denote the beginning of old age, due to its long-time association with retirement and collection of a government pension (Bowling et al., 2005). However, retirement is now likely to occur at a range of ages, with some opting to leave the workforce early and others choosing to work longer, or perhaps semi-retire. Thus, it seems that retirement is no longer a particularly reliable marker on its own. Even bodily markers of decline are less reliable at a time when instances of severe illness and physical disability are in decline. A body of literature explores ways in which age and aging have been conceived both objectively and subjectively, by individuals. Authors Bowling et al.(2005) have explained that people tend to associate age with how they look and feel, the things they do and what their interests are. They argue that this process of creating age-identity, or the self-perceived age of individuals, is significant and should be further explored. To them, using chronological age to categorize people does not take into account the wide range of circumstances of people physically, psychologically and socially. Jenny Hockey and Allison James have similarly problematized age categorization, suggesting that:

Nominal categories – be they ‘child’, ‘adult’, or ‘old person’ – do not map easily onto the experience of the individual. In memory or imagination, or in some bodily difference, people often fail to live up to the requirements of the category to which they might seem to belong on the basis of age and generation. (2003: 200)

Emerging from the field of social gerontology, social theories of aging have attempted to explain the development of individuals as they age. Now largely discredited, disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry, 1961; Achenbaum and Bengston, 1994) was first proposed in the 1960s. It described aging as a gradual process of social withdrawal. Theories that have emerged since then have recognized both the positive effects that can be realized when engagement is maintained, along with the reality that it is the inclination of many people to do so. Activity theory (Havighurst, 1961; Knapp, 1977) is premised on this idea and yet was criticized on the basis of expecting older adults to maintain middle-age lifestyles, while failing to take into account variations between individuals and specific limitations they may face (Walker, 2002). Bridging the gap between these two theories is continuity theory (Atchley, 1989), which with its incorporation of life course perspective (described below), suggests that the

development of habits, patterns and behaviours over the course of one's whole life will have a determining impact on that person's life and behaviour in later life. According to this theoretical perspective, a socially outgoing young adult would be expected to retain this trait as he or she grows older.

With roots in sociology, the life course perspective has developed over the last several decades and increasingly informs research across social science disciplines (Mayer, 2009). The idea of a life course moves beyond the notion of age as a given, static categorical identity. Avoiding the tendency to focus on distinct phases of life, it instead views individuals within the context of the entire life span. In this perspective, the complete set of experiences and circumstances that comprise and contextualize an individual life are seen as influencing the future course and outcomes of the individual. Noting the relative absence of the physical body from theoretical discussions of the life course, Hockey and James (2003) have offered a new addition to this approach. They describe an interactive process emphasizing that aging individuals contribute to the social structure while also being shaped by it. Identity, in their view, is forged by the convergence of imposed structure and personal agency at the site of the body.

Increasingly, gerontological research has focused on agency, or the capacity of older individuals to control or influence their own situations. However, as authors Grenier and Phillipson (2013) suggest, discussions of agency are underpinned by conceptions of the term that imply particular circumstances, including the retention of a certain level of health and independence. This understanding, Grenier and Phillipson argue, creates difficulty for understanding how agency might be present among older individuals with physical or mental impairments, or who face various structural limitations. They make the case for recognizing "more passive and/or less active notions of agency, that take account of constraints ranging from the structural to the personal, and that challenge the underlying assumptions of health, control and independence that are increasingly promoted in current perspectives" (Grenier & Phillipson, 2013: 74).

## **2.4. Aging in Place and the Significance of Neighbourhood**

Research suggests that most people prefer to stay in their homes and neighbourhoods as they age, even with the onset of physical decline (Smith, 2009; Holland and Kellaheer, 2006; Landorf et al., 2008). “Aging in place” has become a popular term among academics, policymakers and service providers alike, though at least one qualitative study has shown that the term is largely unfamiliar among members of the demographic category to which it usually refers (Wiles et al., 2011). The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (2013) suggests that it denotes a situation whereby seniors are able to remain “at home safely, comfortably and independently, later in life” (FCM, 2013: 5). It also notes that in some cases, definitions replace “home” with “community”. The benefits of aging in place are seen as reflecting the wishes of older people and their families: to preserve an individual’s sense of independence and, to help them cope with age-related mental and physical decline (Landorf et al., 2008:501). It is also seen as being preferable in terms of cost-effectiveness when compared with institutional options. Planner and social gerontologist Gerald Hodge (2008) notes that communities are influential in shaping the lifestyles of older residents through their physical layouts, accessibility, and services. Further, he maintains that it is at this level that seniors’ needs must be addressed. Yet, while the important role of neighbourhood is likely to increase with aging trends, neighbourhood has so far been given less attention than other environments in discussions of “optimal” aging (Holland and Kellaheer, 2006; Menec et al., 2011).

Since the 1960s, the field of environmental gerontology has developed as field primarily concerned with the role of the physical environment in aging. Yet, as Wahl and Weisman (2003) note, it is increasingly difficult to speak only of the physical environment without consideration for social and cultural contexts. Thus, this field is increasingly concerned with what some have termed the “sociophysical environment” (Wahl and Weisman, 2003: 617). One focus of environmental gerontology is on “the role of neighbourhoods as they present both opportunities and constraints to their residents...and [on] the community as the locus of aging within a broader, social policy perspective” (Wahl & Weisman, 2003; 617). However, researchers have identified some limitations of environmental gerontology scholarship. For one, they have observed that

research has thus far largely been carried out in American rural and institutional contexts despite the fact that most elderly people live in urban, neighbourhood settings (Smith, 2009). Where there has been a focus on neighbourhood, it has tended to be in the context of socio-economically deprived or declining areas (Burns et al., 2012).

Robert Chaskin (1997) has argued that new ideals of contextual, community-based planning have helped make the case for neighbourhood as a real and useful unit of analysis that is increasingly the focus of policy and funding. He argues that this is due in part to “the conviction that the interrelated needs and circumstances of individuals and families are grounded in a specific context of relationships, opportunities and constraints, which, to a large degree, are spatially defined or delimited” (Chaskin, 1997: 521). In fact, a wide body of scholarship justifies the importance of neighbourhood as an object of study and focus for urban policy, while identifying the need for further research into the meaning and impact of neighbourhood for different categories of people (Kearns & Parkinson, 2001; Gould & Austin Turner, 1997). Even so, in the context of globalization, increased mobility and expanded networks, some may wonder if neighbourhoods still maintain an important role in the lives of urban dwellers. Along these lines, Ray Forrest (2009) has explored the continuing relevance of neighbourhood in an age of globalization and technological change. He argues that as neighbourhood loses significance on some fronts, it is becoming (or has remained) especially significant in other ways – including as the geographic area of primary significance to a growing elderly population. It has further been argued that greater movement of goods, people and communications “does not prevent interaction from densifying at specific points of space” (Piselli, 2007: 872). It is well established in the literature that neighbourhood can take on greater significance for older people, who may find that their social interactions become increasingly limited to the areas around their homes (Holland and Kellaheer, 2006). This would seem to assume reduced mobility in older age, due to various physical and health issues that may make driving, or even walking longer distances difficult. However, not all older people experience these limitations in the same way or at the same time – if at all. Even those who do may find ways to compensate, such as using taxis, transit or securing rides from family or friends. The increasing use of online technology, including by seniors, has also made it possible for interaction to take place across great distances without any need to leave home (Veenhof & Timusk, 2009).

Older people's daily lives take them out of their homes and into neighbourhoods, where Holland and Kellaher maintain that their success in participation and integration depends on “‘anchor points’ of association over which they maintain control” (Holland and Kellaher, 2006: 159). Familiarity, they claim, is important in providing older residents with a sense of security and belonging and is cultivated, in part, through memory and past experience.

## **2.5. Age-Friendly Movement**

Discussions of neighbourhood and aging in place lead easily into a consideration of age friendliness. Age friendliness is widely discussed in literature pertaining to the environments in which people age, whether in cities, neighbourhoods or other physically or spatially defined areas. The movement for age-friendly communities can be traced back to 2006, with the launch of the Global Age-Friendly Cities Project by the World Health Organization (WHO). Since then, it has been adopted by jurisdictions worldwide, including in Canada – both at the federal and other levels. As defined by the WHO (2007: 5), an age-friendly city is one in which “policies, services, settings and structures support and enable people to age actively”. Cities do this by:

- Recognizing the wide range of capacities and resources of older people;
- anticipating and responding flexibly to aging-related needs and preferences;
- respecting their decisions and lifestyle choices;
- protecting those who are most vulnerable; and
- promoting their inclusion in and contribution to all areas of life (5).

Menec et al. (2011) have assessed the age-friendly approach through the lens of ecological theory, which focuses on the interaction between people and the multiple contexts they are part of. Noting that age-friendliness is one of many problems that compete for public attention and action, one of their main contributions is in linking the goals of age-friendliness with other public concerns. For example, “walkable” neighbourhoods might simultaneously address issues of mobility (not just for older people) and environmental sustainability. By recognizing the ways that issues and needs are interrelated, a foundation for joint action can be realized. However, they also draw

attention to the problem of a social movement to support the lifestyles of older adults that may not in fact include them in the process. As they explain:

The first issue, in the notion of age-friendly communities, is that older adults are an integral part of ensuring that a senior's viewpoint is taken in decisions, policies, and planning...Engagement of older adults would be, therefore, essential. Yet seniors' engagement should not be presumed. In the political arena, the myth that there is a "senior vote", whereby older adults identify themselves primarily in terms of their age and, consequently, vote as an age block has been dispelled (Binstock, 2000). Similarly, making communities age-friendly might not be a particular concern for many older adults (Menec et al., 2011; 487).

This quotation provides a strong basis for the inquiry mounted in this study, which is to complicate and question simplistic categorizations of old age and ideal environments for aging by seeking to understand and highlight the varied experiences of individuals. Accomplishing that goal should make it possible to propose more informed suggestions about how environments might be made more supportive of seniors who live within these.

The literature reviewed here has prepared the way for the discussion to follow by first identifying some of the issues introduced and explored in aging literature and second, by considering ways in which some generalized assumptions about how issues of aging are approached might usefully be questioned. However, before venturing deeper into this discussion through presentation of research findings, the study's methodology will be outlined.

## **Chapter 3.**

### **Methodology**

The research methodology employed in this study depends in large part upon conducting and analyzing a small number of detailed qualitative interviews. This method provided a way of gaining insight into individual experiences, feelings and perceptions that could not be achieved to the same degree through other means. While surveys can provide some of this information, they are better suited to questions that provide for straightforward data analysis. Qualitatively conducted interviews, on the other hand, may allow for more subtle analysis by allowing for and taking advantage of more complex responses from participants. This, in turn, allows for the possibility of taking into consideration previously overlooked factors and ideas that emerge during the course of an interview.

Interviews were conducted with seniors who reside on Vancouver's West Side and/or who spend a significant amount of leisure time in West Side neighbourhoods. The geographic focus on the West Side was, in some ways, chosen for convenience. Indeed, in an ethnographic study such as this, which does not strive for statistical representivity or generalizability, choice of location is to a certain extent, irrelevant. A similar study carried out elsewhere would be expected potentially to reveal differing circumstances, but this speaks to the very point of this research, which seeks to highlight variation and the need for research to look for specificity, even within neighbourhoods. The reason for keeping the selection criteria relatively open was to allow the research to capture and reflect diverse experiences. Sixty five was chosen as an age widely associated with the notion of "senior" and also as an age when many people might have begun to experience life transition marked by the prior departure of children from the home, retirement and so on. The rationale for recruiting both "involved" and "non-involved" individuals was again designed to understand diversity and complexity in aging. For

example, it is interesting to explore why a resident chooses not to engage in local programs, or, the different ways that participation has meaning for different people and how this might relate to personal characteristics, such as age, employment status or others. For the purposes of the study, “involvement” was used to indicate regular participation in organized programs or activities. However, as the discussion to follow will show, the lines between involved and non-involved are not as easily drawn.

### **3.1. Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with 13 individuals aged 65 and over who live or spend time in West Side neighbourhoods. Interview recruitment was carried out using the following strategies:

#### **3.1.1. Posted Advertisements**

Posters detailing the study and asking for interview participants were displayed in neighbourhood facilities. The posters included contact information so that interested individuals could contact the researcher directly and confidentially. This recruitment strategy proved unfruitful in attracting many participants. Posters were placed at the Kitsilano and Dunbar Community Centres, Kerrisdale Seniors Centre, Kitsilano Neighbourhood House (KNH), Tapestry Seniors Residence, Brock House, Kitsilano Public Library at a local coffee shop, grocery store and church bulletin board. The poster in the grocery store was successful in attracting one interview participant. Several churches and housing co-ops were contacted by email, but did not respond. Later on in the recruitment phase, KNH posted the recruitment ad on their website. On one occasion, I set up a small table in the Kerrisdale Seniors Centre with posters and business cards. While not permitted to initiate contact with anyone, several people approached the table to ask about the study and I recruited a few participants this way.

#### **3.1.2. Personal Contacts and Third Party Referral**

Because posters proved to be a largely unsuccessful recruitment tool, I relied significantly on my own personal contacts and those of people I know. In each of these

cases, the study was explained and the individual was asked about their potential interest in participating with complete freedom to decline.

Interview questions for older residents/participants were aimed at gathering information about the following:

- Types and locations of activities
- Daily/weekly routines
- Extent and locational range of social networks
- Family relationships
- Benefits and meaning derived from involvement in programs and activities
- Relationships and activities that may have come about indirectly as a result of participation in neighbourhood activities
- Perceptions of the neighbourhood, including perceived change and adaptations made to deal with change
- Limitations and barriers to social participation
- Anticipated lifestyle changes and future needs
- Conceptions of “age-friendly” neighbourhoods

In the case of interviews conducted with individuals who were not involved in organized neighbourhood programming, I sought to learn why this was the case and how social needs are met outside of participation in formal activities. My intention, based on Mario Small’s (2009) concept of “saturation” was to stop interviewing new participants when I determined that I was no longer uncovering new themes and patterns in the interviews. In practice, the amount of data collected was determined, in part, by time constraints and the number of willing participants who met my selection criteria (age 65 or above and a resident of Vancouver’s West Side).

My main ethical considerations were focused on the interview phase of the research. Although I did not ask particularly sensitive questions, I attempted to ensure the safety and comfort of participants. I was careful not to ask them to go beyond their physical limits (in terms of getting to and from interviews, sitting through extended sessions etc.). In addition to being responsive in selecting with the participants suitable

interview locations, I asked participants in the consent form, to inform me of any accommodations they would require in order to participate comfortably.

Interviews generally lasted from 30 to 90 minutes and were usually held in a location suggested by the participant. Locations included participants' residences, a seniors centre, coffee shops and a neighbourhood park.

Throughout both the data gathering and analysis phases, interviews were considered individually, in relation to one another, and in light of observations in order to identify common themes, differences and areas for further inquiry. Observation and interview data was also evaluated against the background of the literature review.

NVivo software was used to code each interview transcript. First, line-by line-coding was used to assign initial codes. Following that, similar codes were clustered together and from the clustered codes, broader themes and concepts were developed.

## Chapter 4.

### **Public and Organizational Knowledge of Aging: Policy Makers and Program Providers**

The types of programs and facilities provided by organizations serving seniors and the way these offerings are justified, explained and promoted are possible indicators of the assumptions and concerns that underpin them and help validate their existence. These may also provide a window into how organizations serving seniors view the circumstances of old age are being perceived by the broader public. In this way, they provide an angle from which to explore how the issue of aging is owned and defined as a public problem by any one organization or group of actors. This section therefore examines claims and rationales put forward by some of the organizations that act on behalf of, or provide programs and facilities to seniors. The main focus here is on ways that the circumstances and needs of older adults are represented in discourses of senior-serving organizations. However, in many ways, government and program providers are partners in the delivery of programs and various public benefits for citizens. Different levels of government might be thought of as service providers, representing senior constituents, generating policy that affects them, and providing funding and supports to organizations that serve this demographic. Both governments and providers of programs for older adults also contribute to the broad discourse on aging. Therefore, before examining the claims of organizations, brief consideration will be given to how issues of aging are framed discursively in Canada by government. It should be noted that despite the fact that different levels of government are treated here independently from one another and from service organizations, this is done with the understanding that there is considerable interaction and cooperation between these.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See the edited volume *Sites of Governance* (2013) by Martin Horak and Robert Young (eds.) for more on multilevel governance.

It is a reality that organizations must compete for attention, funding and clients, and doing this successfully may involve careful crafting of an image to show that the organization is fulfilling a purpose that is believed externally to be important and worthwhile (Nichols, 2008). Likewise, governments are careful about how the messages they communicate will reflect on themselves and be received by the voting public. Thus, in the case of both government and other organizations, I proceed on the assumption that the claims highlighted and examined are those intentionally put forward for public consumption. As such, they may or may not be fully representative of the underlying beliefs and rationale. Nevertheless, because this is the knowledge promoted publically, it is influential in shaping the way issues are seen and reproduced, and is therefore of interest here.

## **4.1. Policymakers**

### **4.1.1. Federal level**

In Canada, the federal government recognizes seniors as an important demographic worthy of attention. Created in 2007, The National Seniors Council advises the government on seniors' issues and has published papers on several topics, with two of the most recent of these concerning volunteerism among seniors and seniors' participation in the labour force. Encouraging opportunities for labour force participation by seniors is promoted as a way of addressing a shrinking labour force and helping to support economic growth (The National Seniors Council, 2013). Seniors are already seen as an important source of voluntary labour, but a source that may diminish as the current cohort of older adult volunteers ages and is increasingly on the receiving end of voluntary services (The National Seniors Council, 2010). Further, there is a stated concern that members of the "baby boomer" generation may be more selective in taking on volunteer roles than the current cohort. It is suggested that they will favour sporadic and flexible volunteer opportunities as opposed to longer-term commitments and that they will seek personally meaningful opportunities that match their educational or professional backgrounds and expertise (The National Seniors Council, 2010).

Significantly, the Council's report recognizes ageism as a barrier to older adult participation, highlighting the common ageist stereotypes that cast seniors as frail, dependent and in a state of decline. This represents an important acknowledgement that can support discursive shifts at an influential level. At the same time, Hostetler has expressed concern that even these more positive discourses of aging can benefit the agendas of governments trying to save money on the provision of benefits (Hostetler, 2011).

#### **4.1.2. Government of British Columbia**

The Government of BC announces on its website its support for an Active Aging policy approach, one that offers promise in meeting issues that face the province. Specifically, it is said that active aging initiatives can assist in relieving the burden on health and social services as the population undergoes a significant shift. Moreover, these will, it is predicted, help seniors to maintain their ability to contribute to society through skills and knowledge. The stated goals of the provincial government with regard to aging are more fully developed in a publication entitled *Seniors in British Columbia: A Healthy Living Framework*, which, in alignment with the stance of the National Seniors Council, emphasizes strategies to support volunteerism and participation in the labour force, as well as to promote healthy living and the creation of age-friendly communities (Ministry of Healthy Living & Sport, 2008).

This very brief and superficial consideration of public discourses at the federal and provincial levels suggests that aging is viewed by these governments as a large scale demographic issue that creates problems for both the labour force, and in turn, the economy, as older adults retire and positions are left unfilled by a less populous younger cohort of workers. However, while seen as a problem in this regard, older adults are also seen as offering part of the solution. In suggesting that seniors be supported in their choices to remain in the workforce and in volunteer positions, they are treated as capable persons and as having something of value to offer.

### **4.1.3. City of Vancouver**

At The City of Vancouver, seniors' issues fall under the scope of the Community Services branch of civic government.<sup>5</sup> The City's webpage for Seniors, Women and Youth states that part of the City's priority on building a healthy, socially sustainable city is "[giving] residents opportunities to interact with other members of their communities, and receive support and encouragement from community organizations and networks" (City of Vancouver, 2012). With specific regard to seniors, there is a statement that many have limited income and face rising health care costs and reduced access to services. There is also a claim that "Council and staff collaborate with the community and all levels of government to provide a range of programs and facilities that keep seniors active, engaged and connected to the health services they need" (City of Vancouver, 2012).

#### ***Age-Friendly Action Plan***

The Age-Friendly Action Plan (2012) is a key municipal document relating to seniors policy. Responding to the questions "What is the City doing to make Vancouver age-friendly and to address the needs of persons with dementia? What else can we do?" (City of Vancouver, 2012: 6), the plan outlines more than 60 items or steps in varying states of progress. At the outset, the plan's language recognizes differences in the lifestyles and needs of seniors, differentiating between "fully independent" older adults and those it describes as being more vulnerable and in need of extra support. Among the action items, the plan calls for dedicated seniors workers at community centres and free facility access for low-income seniors and caregivers. Other items include increasing physical accessibility of community gardens, more benches and bus shelters and exploring the "hub" and program models of existing facilities, such as the Kitsilano and Kerrisdale Community Centres. Some items are aimed directly at fostering social opportunities; for example, providing community centre programs to connect seniors with one another and providing free locations for seniors to visit and socialize at Parks Board facilities. Many other items specifically address the needs of persons with dementia.

<sup>5</sup> A Seniors Advisory Committee also exists and reports to Council.

With its emphasis on social opportunities and connecting seniors with one another, the information made available by the City, through both its website and the Age-Friendly Action Plan, seems to suggest that aging is viewed partly in terms of social isolation and or loneliness. Declining health and mobility are suggested by the “need to be connected to health services” (City of Vancouver, 2012) and by action items which promote the physical accessibility of spaces, opportunities for rest, and so on. Finally, the incorporation of issues relating to persons with dementia into a plan for an age-friendly city seems to conflate experiences that may not belong together. This kind of association can serve to reinforce unhelpful stereotypes about later life. At the same time, creating a greater range of opportunities for older adults to access destinations and to engage in activities of their choosing is a positive step that respects the diversity of individuals and their ability to make lifestyle choices. Further, the Action Plan was an outcome of a consultation process, which included input from seniors and community partners through open dialogue. However, a question raised by the Age-Friendly Action Plan is how does a focus on target populations or “problems” discursively tied to specific groups diminish capacity to best address urban issues that may affect multiple groups? Members of younger age groups may also face physical, financial and other challenges that may limit their access to facilities, programs and leisure opportunities. This is a thought that will be left for now but will be revisited in the concluding section of this study.

## **4.2. Neighbourhood Organizations Serving Seniors**

Having considered the City’s approach to serving older adults, consideration is now given to those organizations that serve seniors most directly, through neighbourhood programs and facilities offered at the neighbourhood level. The following are statements of vision, mission and purpose made by some of the organizations that serve seniors on Vancouver’s West Side, statements that reflect similar and related goals.

## **Well-being/Quality of Life**

In the following statements, organizations emphasize their roles in promoting the well-being or quality of life of those whom they seek to serve. Well-being and quality of life in these cases are tied to the considerations of friendship, self-worth, independence, health, education and inclusion.

“The South Granville Seniors Centre works together with adults aged 55 and above to support their well-being in ways that promote friendship, diversity and individual worth.” (South Granville Seniors Centre)

“To enhance the well-being of seniors within our community by offering programs that foster independent living with a focus on health and wellness, social interaction and education.” (Kitsilano Neighbourhood House)

“WESN improves the quality of life of adults aged 55+ by providing social, educational and recreational programs and services that foster connection and inclusion in the broader community.” (West End Seniors Network)

Few would argue that enhancing well-being and quality of life are worthwhile pursuits. Nor would they disagree with the proposition that friendship, self-worth, independence, health, education and inclusion are supportive of these goals. However, a problem exists with the wording of the statements – particularly the last two - which imply that the organizations themselves are responsible for “enhancing” and “improving” the lives of older adults. Only the first statement is worded to suggest that the organization plays a supporting role to the 55+s it serves, without implying a need for improvement. The last statement is noteworthy in that it describes the role of the organization as helping the older individual to link into the wider community, although it is not clear how “community” is defined in this case. Dunbar Community Centre likewise places emphasis on interaction (meeting people) and on remaining “active and engaged” - again, in a generally defined “community,” which could refer to a community of program and facility users and staff, a community of seniors, or the broader neighbourhood community:

“Dunbar Community Centre offers lots of choice for seniors interested in meeting people and staying active and engaged in their community” (Dunbar Community Centre).

These types of statements do not, however, acknowledge ways that older adults may or may not choose to be “active and engaged.” In the case of the last statement, choice is offered, but only within the confines of the centre’s programs, which would therefore seem to be made to stand for “the community.”

### **Satisfaction/Fulfillment**

Closely related to claims of supporting quality of life and well-being are the affirmations offered by several of the organizations that describe themselves as increasing life satisfaction and fulfillment. The following statements provide examples of this:

“The purpose of the Brock House Society is to provide for its members a social, intellectual, recreational and cultural centre, and, through a stimulating program of activities, enable members to achieve a more satisfying life” (Brock House Society).

“A West End community that inspires and supports older adults to live involved, vibrant and fulfilling lives” (West End Seniors Network).

The wording of these claims could, perhaps, be interpreted as suggesting that older adults might well have lives that are lacking in satisfaction and fulfillment. Furthermore, they implicitly suggest that older adults may not themselves be able or motivated to pursue these objectives on their own. In both cases, the wording casts the organizations as providing the ability or the inspiration for older adults to make needed improvements to their lives.

One organization describes its membership as largely living alone, on fixed income and “at risk of isolation and depression due to reduced social interaction.” It seeks to “foster a caring and inclusive community where seniors are connected and can find friendship and freedom from isolation” (South Granville Seniors Centre). While it would be possible and relatively easy for an organization to quantify the living arrangements and income status of the individuals it serves, it would seem less

straightforward to predict one's risk of becoming isolated or depressed and to attribute this to reduced social interaction. Further, the general impression conveyed is that seniors are isolated and need "freeing" from this situation. While these claims might describe the circumstances of some seniors, it is by no means clear that they describe equally well all seniors in the centre's catchment area.

There is a significant and readily perceptible difference in the professional discourses of aging reflected by program providers and the public discourses of government considered previously. The language of the federal and provincial governments in particular, stresses older adults as a resource, emphasizing what they can offer in terms of their labour and time, while the senior-serving organizations almost invariably suggest that they themselves offer something that older adults certainly need. The sometimes-competing claims and visions examined here are usefully considered in the context of Eva Gulløv's (2003) research on children in institutional settings. Her work has illustrated ways in which uncertainty and contested notions about the place of children in Danish society are manifest in children's institutions that reflect varying and sometimes contradictory goals. On one hand, Gulløv notes that children are imagined and treated as autonomous subjects, capable and permitted to make their own decisions. On the other hand, this relative freedom is experienced within intentionally planned and monitored institutional environments, which children have not chosen for themselves and which model a very particular set of values. In a similar way, seniors in Canada are, on one hand, described as active, productive and capable of contributing; on the other hand, cast in the language of programming for seniors in quite different terms.

This section has reviewed some of the discursive claims made by organizations and governments about older adults. Together, these claims represent both a certain type of organizational knowledge about and interest in aging and older adults and a type of organizational discourse or way of speaking about issues in a field of work. These are significant not only because they involve value judgements about what individuals need or ought to aspire to, but also because they become part of taken for granted ways of speaking about a diverse category of individuals. Kooiman (2003) has described that

governing inevitably involves forming images of the governed.<sup>6</sup> These images, formed in many different ways and varying in their complexity, accuracy and composition, always serve to simplify the complex and are comprised, in part, of “presumptions, hidden values and false knowledge” (Kooiman, 2003: 43). Nevertheless, they act as “main frames of reference” (Kooiman, 2003: 29) actively employed in governing and become “embedded” in the thought processes of both the governing and governed. In consequence, Kooiman suggests that images should be tested, calling for “implicit images [to be] made explicit and explicit images...tested for their relevance for issues at hand” (Kooiman, 2003: 44). The idea of ‘governing images’ is highly applicable in considering the discourses encountered here, and can be kept in mind through the next section, which extends this discussion by considering the claims of another group of “experts” – academic researchers.

<sup>6</sup> See Kooiman (2003), Chapter 3: “Governing Images” for a more in depth discussion of this.

## **Chapter 5.**

### **Expert Knowledge of Aging: Academic Research**

The literature review presented earlier in this paper examined ways in which issues of aging can be framed and approached. This section moves closer to the research question, focusing on how academic literature has tended to characterize and generalize the circumstances of aging individuals/old age, as well as how it talks about the programs and facilities designed to accommodate individuals within these circumstances. This includes discussion of older adults' participation in social, recreational and leisure activities and use of seniors centres. Again, the aim in doing this is to take summary account of "expert" knowledge of seniors in order to compare this with the personal accounts of actual members of this demographic category.

#### **5.1. Characterizing Old Age**

"Problems" of old age have received no shortage of attention from academic researchers. Much like government agencies and service organizations, many researchers rely on perceived problems and target populations as focuses for their work. With regard to older adults, much of the pertinent scholarship has tended to focus on problems of mental and physical decline as well as isolation and loneliness. The following quotation provides an example of the type of "common knowledge" that frequently appears in work on aging:

When adults approach the end of the life course, they retire from work, their children grow up and move away, they experience the loss of aging peers, and health conditions increasingly limit social activities. Under these unique conditions, older adults are especially vulnerable to loneliness (Rote, Hill and Ellison, 2012).

It is from this premise that many scholars appear to formulate their questions and inquiries. When older adults do not conform to these expectations, they are often treated as 'exceptional' and researchers are interested in finding out why this might be the case. For example, Rote, Hill and Ellison (2012) cite Coor and Moorman (2011) who claim that social isolation and loneliness among older adults are “neither an inevitable nor universal feature of aging.” If this is the case, ask Rote, Hill and Ellison, then “how do some older adults delay or avoid the conditions of isolation and loneliness” (39)? This problem is noted within the aging literature. From a social work perspective, Lenard Kaye (2005) has observed that “gerontological practice emphasizes the problems, crises and losses experienced by individuals as they age. At the same time, discussions of social work intervention with older adults centre inevitably around strategies for dealing with those problems, crises and losses (Kaye, 2005: xi).” Kaye speaks of the increasing numbers of the “new aged” – a category of older adults who he claims are more active and better off in many ways than previous generations - and notes the lack of literature giving attention to their experiences.

## **5.2. Aging Well**

Literature on aging is frequently concerned with the question of how people age well. This concern is reflected in the regular use of familiar terms like “successful aging”, and alternatives including “healthy aging”, “active aging” and “optimal aging.”

In the 1980s, Rowe and Kahn (1987; 1997) expanded the notion of successful aging to include not just freedom from disease and disability, as it had traditionally been conceived, but also high cognitive and physical capacity, and active engagement with life. They recognized that characteristics of decline commonly accepted as inevitable outcomes of advancing chronological age, were associated with age rather than being age-dependant and that lifestyle and other factors played a significant role in producing varied experiences. As Martin et al. (2014) document, many studies have since examined the idea of successful aging, exposing problematic associations and a lack of consensus on meaning and terms of measurement. Implicitly, the language of “aging well” implies that is also possible to not age well, successfully, optimally, and so on. This raises multiple issues, including the question of who defines success and how to

account for barriers to success that may be beyond an individual's control. Nevertheless, the idea that some ways of aging produce more positive benefits and thus, are more desirable than others, persists and continues to inform research on a wide variety of aging-related questions.

Activity is a central concept in much academic work related to aging. Stephen Katz (2000) has traced the use of the concept through the aging literature, and his work is particularly helpful in understanding how activity has come to constitute the focus and the framework of so much aging discourse. Katz suggests that beyond being simply something that people do, activity provides measurable behaviours that serve to bridge the lives of older people into a large body of expert knowledge. According to him, it also “expands the social terrain upon which gerontologists and related professionals who work with the elderly can intervene” (Katz, 2000: 139).

### **5.3. The Role of Social, Recreational and Leisure Activities**

The discussion of social networks figures prominently in literature about older adults' participation in social, recreational and leisure activities. Generally understood as being comprised of the social relationships connected with individuals and the nature of the links between them, social networks are believed to influence behaviour in a number of ways. These include the shaping of social behaviour through social support, social influence, social engagement and attachment, as well as access to resources (Berkman et al., 2000: 846-847). Different types of social activity, ranging from fostering friendships to volunteering, are reported to have a positive effect on self-esteem and the maintenance of healthy lifestyles and behaviour.

A large and diverse body of literature focuses on the link between social engagement and various health outcomes. The idea that health is influenced by social ties was first explored in the late 1970s and now has broad acceptance (Berkman et al., 2000). Some research has focused specifically on the potential of programs and spaces for older adults to support mental and emotional health among them. For instance, Berkman et al. (2000) have noted that depression affects a significant number of older adults, who can be at increased risk due to social isolation, lack of social support and

stressful lives or events. In addition to alleviating stress and other negative feelings, such as loneliness, helplessness and depression, social participation and friendship are credited with protecting seniors against a range of physical and mental conditions, as well as aiding recovery from health ailments (Holmes and Joseph, 2011: 1-2).

## 5.4. Seniors Centres

Diverse in their offerings and specific in the forms they take, seniors centres have been generally defined as:

Designated places that play important roles in the aging services network, making a broad spectrum of activities and services available to older persons on a frequent and regular basis as a part or result of a community planning process. They provide seniors with opportunities for social interaction that can encompass strong friendships and contribute to positive feelings of self-worth and community belonging (Krout, 1989: 5)

This definition is contained in the work entitled *Seniors Centers in America* (1989) by gerontologist John Krout, who synthesized research on American seniors centres and the various definitions of them that have been employed academically, politically and organizationally. While the definition suggests that centres hold potential to provide positive benefits for older adults, a recent literature review found that relatively little research has focused on the benefits that centres actually provide (Dal Santo, 2009). Among existing research are studies that have attempted to identify characteristics of individuals that make them more or less likely to attend centres. Rationales for such studies include finding out if centres are serving those who are presumed to need them the most (Ralston, 1991) and understanding how centres might better attract new users (Winter and Calsyn, 2000). Study findings on these matters have been largely inconclusive. For instance, no consensus exists as to the extent that variables such as education, income, ethnicity and other factors play in individuals' use of centres. There is, however, general agreement that attendance is positively related with increased age until about age 85 (Winter and Calsyn, 2000). One frequently cited study found that the distance between one's residence and a centre were important determinants of attendance and that characteristics of centres (e.g. days and hours of

operation, years established in the community and facility type) were a more important factor in attendance than characteristics of individuals themselves (Ralston, 1991).

Originally intended to address social isolation by encouraging social engagement and interaction, seniors' centres have generally moved toward a multipurpose model, which emphasizes health and education, alongside more traditional social objectives (Rhynes et al, 2013). Social engagement and interaction are, nonetheless, still important aspects of centres. According to Taylor-Harris & Zhan (2011), seniors multipurpose centres provide "an environment where through social integration, social engagement, and social networks, strong, lasting friendships are formed" (353). From this premise, studies have focused on how participation in organized seniors' programming can support emotional well-being by, for instance, reporting lower incidence of depression among seniors centre attendees (Fulbright, 2010).

The positive impacts of senior centre attendance on specific subsets of the older adult population have also been researched. Taylor-Harris and Zhan (2011) looked at African-American participants and found that centres were a key setting in which older adults forged new identities based on their adoption of healthier lifestyles, expanded social lives, new roles, and the perception of freedom and control from being able to choose their level and type of involvement within the centre.

One study found that women who lived alone derived greater positive friendship benefits from their use of seniors centres than their peers who lived with a partner (Aday, Kehoe and Farney, 2006). Interestingly, other researchers have found that over time, participation in formal activities (clubs, groups and programs) tended to remain constant among widows, while informal participation (such as talking on the phone and seeing friends at home) increased. This suggested that informal activity might provide as much or more emotional and practical support for people experiencing loss (Utz et al., 2002). Among grandparents who are themselves caregivers, Rhynes et al. (2013) found that seniors centres may provide a place of relative privacy and respite from their responsibilities. However, they did not find that attendance at seniors centres positively affected health or loneliness – two commonly touted outcomes.

While much of the focus of the literature is on the positive outcomes that senior centre attendance can facilitate, some authors have brought attention to ways in which centres may foster circumstances that cause individuals to feel unwelcome. For instance, Salari, Brown and Eaton (2006) have shown that centres can act as “territories” over which claimants (attendees) exert ownership. Their ethnographic study of three centres showed that regular visitors established and enforced societies and cultures within, sometimes with the effect of excluding newcomers. They argue the importance of understanding not only the characteristics of individuals inclined to use centres and their patterns of use, but also the types of organizational and social environments operational within, which can promote inclusionary or exclusionary behaviours. Their findings reflected that where seniors had more control and more say in the running of programs, they tended to show less territorial behaviour. Understanding these dynamics, the authors argue, is key to fostering centre environments that can attract and retain younger members who, with many other options available to them, may be discouraged by a single negative experience.

The idea of attracting younger members is of particular significance currently, given the large number of adults entering or approaching the traditional years of retirement or older age. Hostetler (2010), who characterizes the seniors centre as a place for interaction and community building sees its particular role as that of also preparing younger or “third age” seniors for the inevitable transition into a “fourth age”, characterized by dependency. In particular, he sees this as happening through the interaction of older and younger participants. Calsyn and Winter (2000) argue that without contact with seniors centres, younger seniors may be less inclined to turn to them in older age, when needs are presumed to be greater. Research has now begun to focus on the impact that the baby boomer generation will have on seniors centres. Hostetler (2010) notes that seniors centres face increasing pressure to serve “at risk” seniors, while appealing to a broader constituency through expanded facilities and program offerings. He expresses concern that a growing emphasis on self-care, combined with the aspirations of many boomers to maintain active lifestyles characterized by consumption and choice may lead to seniors centres that cater to a particular “type” of senior at the expense of those who may have higher or more traditional needs.

## **5.5. Other Ways of Thinking about Active Aging**

Some literature has begun to recognize alternative ways that individuals might maintain active lifestyles as they age. “Active aging” is a term related to the notion of aging successfully that has traditionally been understood in terms of continuing employment or physical activity. However, Kim Boudiny (2012) has cautioned against this generalized understanding, arguing that there are multiple ways to age actively. Seniors at different stages may choose different ways of incorporating activity into their lives that may be physical, social, mental and/or solitary in nature. Rather than focusing on particular types of involvement, Boudiny suggests that supportive policy should embody flexibility and adaptability. It should, she asserts, “centre on engagement with life in general,” as well as social relationships (Boudiny, 2012: 18-19). Stephen Katz (2000) has similarly directed attention to the tendency to focus on more measurable aspects of active aging and those which align with “middle-class moral and family-oriented conventions” (Katz, 2000: 143). Highlighting the potential disconnect between professional discourses and personal experience, he asks “what happens to activity as a professional vocabulary when it enters the narrative practices of older people and the inside of aging?” (Katz, 2000:144) This study responds to this question and to the call from Kirk, Waldrop and Wittner (2008: 17) for “additional comparisons of engagement and isolation between groups who did not participate in senior centers and those who did [to] increase understanding of social connectedness”.

## **5.6. Summary**

Although the selection of expert literature outlined here by no means provides exhaustive coverage, it nonetheless represents some of the common ways that aging and old age are reflected in academic literature. It also reflects how participation in social, recreational and leisure activities have been linked to these representations. The literature here is largely suggestive of a preoccupation with aging in terms of health and well-being in its physical, mental and emotional dimensions, where organized programs and seniors’ facilities are seen as interventions or mechanisms to reduce the potential for negative outcomes. In this way, there is a degree of correlation with the professional or organizational discourses examined earlier. Alternative forms of aging actively – in

non-organized or solitary approaches and contexts - are acknowledged too, though they have received considerably less attention. Further, emphasis on the agency and choice of individuals is largely missing from the literature (and from the professional discourses examined in the previous section). This research gap allows for dominant discourses to fill the void and obscure instances where the real circumstances of individuals could add to the discussion and contribute to a more complex understanding. The next section will introduce actual seniors who shared their experiences through qualitative interviews. The literature considered up to this point offers a way of reflecting on these experiences, but also allows for the experiences of participants to reflect back upon it.

## **Chapter 6.**

### **Research Findings**

#### **6.1. Participant Profiles**

This section turns to the findings provided by conducting detailed qualitative interviews with seniors in Vancouver's West Side neighbourhoods. These interviews sought to explore and understand how participants experienced and found meaning from social life within and outside of organized neighbourhood program and facility settings. The information that was gathered is presented thematically to illustrate significant findings. However, this section begins with a collective description of the individuals involved in this research, followed by brief profiles of three of the interview participants. These examples, selected to highlight three very different individual lives, also serve as an entry point to considering the degree of alignment or discrepancy with the claims about the nature and needs of older persons contained within the organizational and academic literatures reviewed above.

##### **General Description of Participants**

The thirteen interview participants for this study ranged in age from 68 to 90 years old. About half were in their late 60s to early 70s and half in their late 70s to mid 80s. One participant was over age 85. Nine participants were female and four were male. Seven participants lived in Kitsilano; three in Kerrisdale; and one each in Point Grey, Fairview and the West End. Only three of the participants (all of them male) lived with a spouse or partner. Among the other participants, a few were widows, a few others were divorced and one had never been married. Only a few of those I spoke with rented apartments; the majority owned homes or condos and a few continued to live in houses that they've been in for many years.

It is worth noting that the majority of interview participants seemed to enjoy relatively high economic security— a situation that is unlikely to be shared among all Vancouver seniors. None of the interview participants lived in an assisted or group living facility. Physical abilities ranged among participants and though a few told me they used walkers to get around outside of the house, they were generally mobile. One participant relied on a cane.

Use of formal programs and facilities varied among those I spoke with. The majority made use of at least some seniors' programming, but a couple did not. The most common places where participants made use of programs and facilities were community centres, seniors centres (in some cases housed within community centres), and neighbourhood houses. The range of activities included drop-in programs, cultural events, discussion groups, book clubs, bridge and more specialized pursuits, such as dance classes and musical groups.

**“Eva”<sup>7</sup> (early 70s)**

Eva had a professional career overseas before moving to Vancouver to care for her late husband, whom she met later in life. After her husband died, she learned how to drive and continued to live in the house they shared together. She maintains close relationships with her husband’s children and grandchildren, with whom she gets together at least once a week. Eva is not involved in organized activities or groups. Maintaining a second residence in her native country, she is away for several months each year. This, she finds, decreases her need to fill time and makes it difficult to maintain steady involvement in things here. While happy spending time alone, she feels that she has a regular and satisfying level of social interaction. Looking after her garden, getting together with friends and walking around the neighbourhood shops are some of the activities that Eva enjoys.

Being on her own, Eva misses the companionship she had with her husband. Without him, she entertains less and sees some friends less often. She also misses the spontaneous activities they used to do together, like going to movies or dining out. Because Eva has little family in Canada, she views her friends as an extended family of sorts. However, since many of her friends live elsewhere in the city and have less income than she does, she finds that she is unable to share with them some of the activities she enjoys, such as travelling. Eva places strong value on feeling a sense of belonging within her neighbourhood. This is a feeling she gets from knowing her neighbours and people in the shops nearby – even with limited interaction. Preferring not to drive, Eva values the variety of shops and services within walking distance of where she lives. While she foresees having to sell her home at some point when the house and yard maintenance becomes too demanding, she plans to remain in the neighbourhood.

<sup>7</sup> The names appearing in this section are pseudonyms assigned to each participant in order to protect their identities.

**“Eric” (late 60s)**

At 69 years old, Eric is a long-time resident of his neighbourhood who lives with his partner in a rented unit. Describing himself as a loner with few friends and limited family contact, Eric claims that he doesn't have much need for socializing. In fact, he states that he feels a closer connection to nature than to people. Eric is nevertheless involved in numerous physical activities, which provide interaction with others. Health and physical activity are very important and a source of pride for Eric, who sees himself as continually improving in these aspects of his life. He does not relate to an aged or 'older' identity and sees himself as different from most people his age, whom he generally perceives as being in poorer health and enjoying activities more "typical" of seniors. Generally, he finds that much of his activity is motivated by his partner, who he describes as being much more outgoing than he is and more aware of things that are going on. Eric enjoys being able to walk to a variety of places in his neighbourhood. He appreciates the variety of stores, restaurants and nearby trails for walking and biking. Spirituality is also an important part of Eric's daily life that he practices privately. This, he feels, helps him to live in the moment, to deal with the circumstances of his life and not worry about things that may happen in the future.

### **“Libby” (mid 80s)**

Having always led a socially active life, Libby still finds that her weeks are full. No longer married yet living on her own in a house, she has adult children in the city (and elsewhere) with whom she has regular contact, although she tries to minimize her reliance upon them. Since sustaining a mobility-limiting injury a couple of years ago, Libby finds movement more difficult than she used to. She has also noticed that friends don't contact her as often. Nevertheless, she maintains a positive and determined attitude, staying busy and taking initiative in finding things to do. Actively engaged in volunteer activities both within and outside of her local seniors centre, Libby knows many people through her various involvements. While she speaks highly of them, she considers these people acquaintances more than friends. Libby loves meeting and going out with friends, whether to restaurants, the beach or on outings slightly further afield. However, for various reasons, she finds herself spending less time with close friends than she used to, and this is something that brings her sadness. In general, Libby laments the lack of close, in-person interaction that she experienced during her younger years and in other places before coming to Vancouver. Though able to drive, Libby is only comfortable using her car for short distances or emergencies and frequently relies on walking and transit to get around. Having observed much change in her neighbourhood over the past several years, she expresses particular regret over the loss of old businesses, homes and young families, which she feels has changed the character of the neighbourhood. Looking ahead to the future, Libby acknowledges that she may eventually need to move into assisted living. However, this idea is unappealing to her and for now, she has no plans to leave her home.

These individuals are illustrative of the very different circumstances of older persons in this neighbourhood. On the surface, a number of differences between the three are apparent. For instance, there are differences in relationship status and living situations. Eric lives with a partner in rented accommodation, while Eva and Libby remain in homes that they no longer share with a partner. The three also display difference in their physical capacities, with Libby experiencing a loss in this regard, and Eric enjoying a range of physical activities free of limitations. There is also remarkable diversity among these participants in terms of how they describe their social needs. On one end of the spectrum is Libby, who describes herself as highly social and missing the close contact with friends she once enjoyed. On the other, is Eric, who feels little need for additional social interaction. Eva seems to occupy the space between these positions, enjoying a steady level of interaction, which she finds satisfactory, though not particularly intense.

Beyond these variations among these three individuals, there is an immediate awareness of the striking difference between the lives briefly sketched here, and the images brought to mind by some of the claims made by organizational and academic experts. However, in discussing the ways that the situations of these participants defy the expectations set out for them, it is useful to consider some of the ways in which their circumstances may, on the surface, seem to correlate with common conceptions of aging.

As noted earlier, literature on aging has tended to focus on the losses associated with later life. These include, but are not limited to loss of family, friends, social life and physical and mental capacity. Certainly, these are things that can affect older adults and indeed, these surfaced among the participants of this study and those profiled here. Libby provides an example of someone who has experienced a mobility-limiting injury that she claims has made activities more difficult. Yet, she defies expectations by continuing to drive and maintaining an active lifestyle, which includes volunteering at her local seniors centre and spending time with friends both within and outside of her neighbourhood.

Loneliness, such a prominent theme in literature on aging, seems to affect Libby most, despite the fact that she maintains contact with family and describes herself as highly social and involved in both organized and casual activities. By contrast, Eric, though he does interact with his partner and others through his participation in sports, considers himself a 'loner' and is happy spending time alone. Eva maintains regular contact with friends and family and is satisfied with her level of interaction, despite not being involved in any formal activities or programs. Eva's circumstances are usefully considered in relation to another prominent theme in aging literature: loss. While she misses elements of the social life that came from having a partner, her situation of being single has not made her isolated or inactive. Instead, she continues to see friends, travel and pursue other activities she enjoys. Significantly, it was through the experience of loss that Eva expanded her mobility by learning to drive.

Eric may provide the clearest counter to conventional depictions of older adults. Claiming disinterest in "typical" seniors' activities and seeing himself not only maintaining but improving his health and physical abilities, he defies common stereotypes. Yet, it is interesting to note that he sees himself as exceptional compared to his peers of similar age, whom he generally perceives as being in poorer health and enjoying pursuits that differ from his. This suggests that even among some seniors, stereotypes of aging may have become internalized.

The remainder of this section will draw on other interviews to explore in more depth and to develop these and other themes.

## 6.2. Classifying Oldness

*One thing I think that's going to come out in your study is that seniors past a certain age – I'm thinking of the older seniors now because I'm nearing 80 - saying what's different about an 80 year old? Apart from that you can't run as fast (laughs) ("Walter", late 70s)<sup>8</sup>*

Walter's comment highlights a key concern of this research, which is challenging the tendency to view concepts like "old," "aging" and "senior" in one-dimensional and stereotypical ways. His comment suggests that many people of advanced chronological age may not view themselves much differently than they would a younger person. This perspective surfaced in other interviews as well. In responding to questions around aging, several interview participants distanced themselves from the notion of oldness. This ranged from subtle indications of still feeling young, to stronger rejections of an aged identity, as in the case of Eric:

*I have the health of the average 20 year old. There's not anything that I can't do that I could do when I was 20... I mean I don't look like a 20 year old. But my body and my health is about the same as a 20 year old (Eric, late 60s).*

Others expressed more definite criteria of what constitutes old age and recognition of passing from one stage to another:

*I'm 70 years old, which is kind of the start of old age, you know. Until you're 70 you can kid yourself that you're in middle age, but when you get to 70 it's the start of old age. I mean you have to face that and accept that which means that there are –there could be disabilities of various kinds (Eva, early 70s).*

This statement is reflective perhaps of more common conceptions of old age, associated with chronological age and decline. And, while those interviewed often did

<sup>8</sup> From here onward, participant quotations will be presented in this way: inset, with italicized font and the participant's pseudonym and age in parenthesis following. Interviewer quotations will be inset and followed by (Interviewer, LA).

not necessarily identify themselves as being “old”, they nevertheless showed that to some degree, they had embraced stereotypical notions of old age.

Yeah, well that’s why I’m talking to different people – because I think there’s a tendency to put older people in a box – (Interviewer, LA)

*Absolutely. The average 70 year old can barely walk, let alone do the kinds of things I’m doing, so yeah, you’re talking to a unique individual (Eric, late 60s).*

This statement from Eric is particularly illustrative because it reflects the degree to which he has accepted an age stereotype, even after the tendency to generalize has just been pointed out to him. “Gwen” similarly distances herself from common conceptions of old age, but shows ready awareness of the stereotype:

*It’s funny when I think of a little old lady, I don’t think of me...I certainly don’t think of me.*

What do you think of? (Interviewer, LA)

*Oh, I think of the old stereotype (laughs hard). I certainly don’t think of me (Gwen, early 70s).*

These excerpts, in which participants allude to “common” notions of oldness, but do not necessarily position themselves within these, lend support to Miller’s (2001) idea that discourses – even popular discourses – are not necessarily consumed readily or completely.

### **6.3. Challenges in Aging**

Regardless of how they self-identified, most participants acknowledged challenges they faced and ways in which their lifestyles had changed with age. What I found in terms of the challenges identified by participants in some ways supported discursive claims that focus on physical decline, loss of mobility and the emotional effects that come with retirement. However, in many cases, the challenges outlined here did not put significant limitations on participants’ abilities to live active, fulfilling and socially engaged lives. Furthermore, and perhaps even more fundamentally, the

struggles that these older persons shared did not, at their core, represent challenges unique to this age group. These ideas will be expanded upon later, but first, some of the ways that participants perceived their lives to be challenging or difficult are outlined.

### **6.3.1. Activities become more difficult**

Several participants mentioned various physical ailments that impacted their lifestyles. These ranged from long-term conditions such as poor eyesight and osteoporosis to painful injuries incurred through falls. Not surprisingly, some participants talked about activities they used to do, but now found difficult or impossible, due to physical limitations. For instance, “Hazel” spoke of not being able to go swimming like she used to:

*If I had somebody with a car I could have gone swimming and you know do the exercise and stuff but I don't do that now and I'd love to go. And this bothers me too (laughs) - my age, my age. Well just the Kits swimming pool – well I used to go every day when I lived at 1st and Arbutus but now it's too far to get down and up...And pushing a walker, well you're tumbling down the hill and going too fast and getting up you can't get up, yeah (Hazel, early 90s).*

Libby had likewise found her activities restricted since sustaining her injury.

So Libby, are there any places or maybe events or things you would like to go to or participate in that maybe you're not able to for some reason? Because either they're not convenient to get to or— (Interviewer, LA)

*I went over there (to Victoria) every second week and now I can't go over. It's just getting from the ground up to the deck (of the ferry)— yeah but there's nowhere else, no. It's not too bad, but I'm not comfortable doing it. I mean I used to get on the ferry and run up—it holds me back so much. However, I'm lucky I can do this much because the doctor said I'd never be back to what I was (Libby, mid 80s).*

Both of these excerpts lend support to the notion that as a person ages, their activities can become more restricted. Closely related to one's own physical mobility is the ability to get around using available modes of transport. As Hazel's statement showed, in some cases, it was not the physical demands of the activity itself that posed the challenge, but the getting to and from.

### **6.3.2. Not driving/relying on transit**

Transportation was a challenge for some participants. Many of those I interviewed no longer drove, did not own vehicles or avoided driving as much as possible. For these people, strong importance was placed on having a variety of shops and amenities within walking distance. TransLink services were widely used and most participants reported being happy with bus service, in particular. However, several participants did relate negative experiences, including being thrown about by sudden stops and starts and struggling with walkers. For Hazel, one experience in which she was thrown to the floor of a bus, led her to abandon the use of city buses altogether.

*I think it's a couple years now since I went on the bus because there was a driver that was really--he would come to a stop and slam on the brakes and everybody would fall and then he'd start off and everybody would fall. Well, I fell and I turned a somersault. I would have been out the back had somebody not caught me. But yeah, so -- mind you I think that 90% of the bus drivers are very good but now it's getting too crowded too (Hazel, early 90s).*

“Marie”, who uses the Sky Train regularly and raves about its convenience, feels differently about taking the bus:

*Well I have a walker. I use a walker, so sometimes it's difficult. I don't go on the bus on rush hour because somebody with a walker -- I tend to stay just you know non-peak hours. But I used to ride the bus a lot before I had a walker. I just feel I'm taking up too much room somehow (Marie, early 80s).*

While participants expressed universal appreciation of neighbourhood walkability and having things nearby, the majority of them maintained an ability to travel further afield if they needed or chose to, either by driving, biking or using transit. For the couple of participants for whom these were not good options, they could generally rely on taxis, or personal contacts for rides.

### **6.3.3. Going out at Night**

Unwillingness or lack of inclination to go out at night was a prevalent finding among drivers and non-drivers alike. While a few people mentioned the hesitation about

driving at night, and safety concerns, there were other reasons as well. “Susan” explained that she wasn’t worried so much about the possibility of violence as not being able to see clearly, and the potential for falling:

*Sometimes, you know the side streets are not very well lit. Like sometimes I’ll go to something at Gordon Neighbourhood House—like there was a volunteer appreciation evening after the election. And I went and I came home. It was after dark, it wasn’t late but the streets weren’t well lit and there were wet leaves around. So, not because I think anybody’s going to attack me, but because I might fall (Susan, late 70s).*

In “Ken’s” case, not wanting to go out in the evening seems to relate more to years of not having evenings to relax and enjoy while working. He expressed disappointment that the activities he’s interested in are only held in the evenings, to meet the needs of working people:

*All of the courses I’ve been able to find are in the evening, which is a no-no for me because when I stopped working, I swore I would never get involved in anything in the evening again. So that’s a bit of a frustration. I wish there were more academic possibilities in the daytime. I understand that most people who are interested are amongst the working group. So they have to be accommodated (Ken, late 60s).*

Walter noted that evenings were a time to spend at home, “catching up” or just spending time with his wife. He suggested that in the event of her passing, he might become more active in the later hours.

#### **6.3.4. Money**

Older age is often associated with lower income, particularly because it is common for people to have fixed income after retirement. Money was a concern for some, though not all of those I interviewed. Even among those for whom finances were not a concern, there was an expressed awareness that this was an important issue for other seniors, with significant implications for their social lives.

*What activities people can afford to participate in depends on—like this exercise class is fairly expensive. So there are people who might you know want to take a class who are not low enough in income to get the subsidy that the City gives...It seems to me that what your income is must*

*have a tremendous influence on the way you live. And where you shop and what activities you participate in (Susan, late 70s).*

While money was not a major concern for Eva, she explained how she was indirectly affected by the fact that it is for many of her friends:

*A lot of my friends have less money than I have, they don't live in Kitsilano most of them, they live on the other side of town and they have less income than I have which means that I can't necessarily – they can't necessarily do the things that I would want to do. And they can't for instance, if I wanted to travel somewhere, I can't necessarily expect them to be able to do that (Eva, early 70s).*

### **6.3.5. Loss of friends, family and social life**

A strong theme in several interviews was the way in which participants' social circles and routines changed as they grew older and transitioned through stages of life. Participants talked about the effect of retirement, loss of social life related to parenting, and the loss of friends, through death or distance.

Ken said of retirement:

*One's social life changes completely. All the old mates from the office they're all gone and you have to get out there and get new people into your life (Ken, late 60s).*

Walter also spoke of the significant impact of retirement from full time work on his social life:

*What I hadn't realized is that most of my friends – and this relates back to your question – were through work. And when you are not seeing them every day and you have to phone them up to make an appointment to go to lunch it's not the same thing. In Vancouver if you work downtown, you probably come there from neighbourhoods all over the Lower Mainland. So it's not like the old traditional village where ok, you're still in the same place and see everybody all the time. No, or even in England, where you might see them in the same pub as you used to. So all of a sudden I was devoid of those day to day encounters with friends and acquaintances (Walter, late 70s).*

Walter went on to explain that the transition away from full time work brought on an unexpected depression that had the additional impact of initially decreasing his motivation to get involved in anything that might help his emotional state by providing structure and opportunities for social interaction.

Participants also discussed the loss of friends and family through death, both those already experienced and those anticipated.

*I can see in the next 5 to 10 years that's going to be happening, um, and I think those losses are harder because your circle is smaller. And uh so I mean we don't sit around talking about it but we all know you know ("Sharon", early 70s).*

Libby spoke of how death had changed the social dynamic among her group of friends:

*There was 16 of us every Saturday night went out-- like with the husbands and we'd go to these little clubs and it was lovely. But now in the last—the girl that I sat beside – she died. And the girl...She lives out in Southlands – she did. And she died. Every Saturday night if we didn't go to a club, we went to her house. And the whole 16 of us it changed overnight. Nobody took it on to do what she did. Like she'd phone me and say "Libby, come on down and have a cup of tea. But phone Sue. And tell Sue to phone Margaret." And within 15 minutes there would be about 25 of us down there (Libby, mid 80s).*

Like Sharon, Walter expressed the expectation of loss, but also the personal capacity to deal with that circumstance:

*One of the things that I probably don't talk to anybody else about – one of the things that an older person has to think about if they're married is the high possibility that one of you will die before the other one. In fact there's a 100% possibility that one of you will die before the other one (laughing). And so I've started to think about that and how my lifestyle will change. There's going to be tremendous trauma and I can't predict what I'll feel like at the time but I'm prepared for it when it happens (Walter, late 70s).*

Walter's comment shows a proactive approach to facing challenges that may accompany getting older; he knows what to expect, has thought about how it will affect his life and is prepared. In talking about going out at night, Walter had suggested that perhaps if his wife were to precede him in death, he would start going out at night more.

Rather than emphasizing loss and a retraction from social life, he looks to new possibilities for engagement.

### **6.3.6. Living Alone**

The state of living on one's own was referenced on many occasions during several interviews. In some ways, it brought together many of the challenges discussed here, from experiencing loss, to finding tasks more difficult, to perhaps most significantly, losing a dimension of social life. Participants spoke of the experience of living alone in varying terms; some expressed a profound sense of loss for a partner and/or lifestyle, while others spoke more generally about their experience, making casual references here and there to living alone. Regardless of the particularities of their situations, for most everyone on their own, it seemed to bring challenges.

Sharon, who divorced in her sixties after having been married for forty years, noted what went into the adjustment to living alone:

*I've probably had to adapt more to being on my own...which has been a whole different situation. Um, 'cause I've never lived on my own. And so that was a big adjustment (Sharon, early 70s).*

She noted that her awareness of places in the city had declined since the end of her marriage. Finding that she simply didn't go out as much, she reported losing a sense of what was out there.

*If I could change that – just have somebody that would phone and say “do you wanna go for dinner?” or “do you wanna go to a movie?” you know I would never get married again I would never live with anybody. Not gonna happen. But just to have somebody that you could go with to places that you normally wouldn't go - on your own (Sharon, early 70s).*

For Sharon, the loss of a companion – someone to do things with – was significantly felt. Her comments also suggest that she perceives a diminished range of options, as there are places she is unlikely to visit on her own. And yet, her resolute intention to remain single shows independence and suggests a feeling of being able to look after herself.

Like Sharon, Eva spoke of missing the “convenience” of companionship and the spontaneous opportunities it provided to go out for dinner and elsewhere. She spoke about how much of her social life had revolved around her position as part of a couple:

*My husband was very gregarious and had a huge circle of acquaintances and so myself by myself I'm not as gregarious as he was and I still know the same people but I don't see them as often and some of them I don't necessarily see at all. It's a little bit different. And I – in that sense, I really miss having a partner (Eva, early 70s).*

The presence of a spouse or partner did seem to affect the activities one might pursue. Eric, for instance, talked about doing activities for his partner's sake and of how she was the one who tended to keep informed of things that were going on locally. However, in some cases, close friends or relatives seemed to fill a similar companion-type role for those who were single or widowed. Marie, for example, had been lucky to have a close friend with whom she could travel, though she had found it hard since the friend's passing to find a friendship that could take on the same role.

*I don't want to travel; I just want to go on a cruise. I went on one to Alaska with my best—with my then best friend Jackie. She was neat and we travelled together. Unfortunately, she died a few years ago. And I haven't been able to find a travelling companion since (Marie, early 80s).*

In this discussion, it is important to recognize the difference between “living alone” and “being alone.” The individuals here, while residing independently, are by no means devoid of relationships with friends, family and other acquaintances. While they may lack a particular dimension of social life, they do this in some cases by choice and meet social needs in other ways, which will be discussed later.

### **6.3.7. Close Friendships**

For a variety of reasons, many participants noted they did not see close friends often.

*I have, you, know a couple of like really good friends and I don't see them all that often.*

*You know these good friends that I have who don't live in the West End, you know they're busy, they have other commitments so we don't see each other more than we see each other. Just because they have other things to do (Susan, late 70s).*

Susan's close friends, though not in her neighbourhood, lived within a reasonable distance by bus. The reason she gave for not seeing them more often was simply their busy schedules. For Libby though, the reason is different. As she explains, distance is the major obstacle in the way of seeing her friends more often. Even though she is still able to drive, she is unwilling to drive the distances required to meet them or pick them up.

*[lowers voice] But see the difference is too, mostly you'd have to go far – do you know what I mean—go to their home and pick them up and bring them over. Because I've very good friends and they want to come out. But I can't meet them. They can't come up because they don't drive now. I drive but I'm not willing at this stage – unless I get better - cause the doctor said I'll never be better. Or, is it that I don't want to be responsible driving? I think it's a lot to do with that (Libby, mid 80s).*

### **6.3.8. Difficulty Making Friends**

*You have to find people that are like-minded and that like the same things as you do and it's not easy to do that. As you get older ("Norma", early 80s).*

Norma does not explain why she finds it harder to meet "like-minded" people at an older age, leaving it only possible to speculate. Conventional theory might attribute her experience to increasing differences in physical and cognitive capacities among peers as they grow older, or to the smaller networks available to older individuals, because of lost roles and involvement. However, not only do many people retain and perhaps even add to their role repertoires as they age, it can be argued that people struggle with this throughout life. A personality trait such as shyness or interests that are primarily solitary in nature are only a couple of many possible factors that could affect one's ability to meet like-minded people at any age.

Ken also expresses his troublesome experience of making friends, though he relates his experience to settling in a new place later in life:

*I find coming late in life to a new place is quite difficult because most of the people here I think have been established in Vancouver for a long time and they have their network of friends and associates. So it's quite hard to break into groups at this stage (Ken, late 60s).*

Again, Ken's comment reflects a challenge that is felt among people at all stages of life. Younger people relocate to pursue education and jobs and to care for ailing family members, among other reasons. These moves are often marked by the loss of regular contact with familiar people and often, difficulty re-establishing social networks in new places.

### **6.3.9. Summary of Challenges**

The challenges that participants shared reflected many of the challenges often reported in expert literature on aging. However, what is usually not acknowledged in the literature is that these same challenges are not necessarily inevitable and can, indeed do, affect people throughout life.

Furthermore, physical conditions resulting from injury, disability or lifestyle factors affect people of all ages. While comments relating to physical ailments and slowing down came up frequently, they were certainly not significant stumbling blocks for everyone I spoke with. For instance, Walter, a long time recreational athlete, still does a gruelling weekly hike at nearly 80 years of age. That is in addition to a host of other routine physical activities, including boat racing and swimming. Likewise, in his late 60s, Eric does not see himself slowing down:

*I have no intention of slowing down with ping pong, racquetball badminton or bicycling or hiking or anything. I don't have a time where I think I'm gonna start going downhill. I've never gone downhill yet. In fact, I'm going uphill. I'm still getting better. By this time next year I'll be maybe the same in racquetball, but better in tennis, better in ping pong and better in badminton, for sure (Eric, late 60s).*

In the cases of those who did face physical limitations, these may have changed some of the activities they had been involved in, but they hadn't fundamentally altered participants' level of engagement. To complicate these and other issues, retirement and loss of roles or purposes brings challenges to seniors just as the loss of a job or the

ability to work for some other reason might cause a younger individual to struggle. The circumstances of having limited income, or of an imbalance between one's financial situation and that of their friends are neither a given, nor invariably tied to age. People of all ages might find that their participation in various activities is limited either directly or indirectly by finances. Social losses too, while perhaps more concentrated in the later years of life, are experienced by young and old. The experience of divorce, again, possible at any age, might bring about certain emotional and lifestyle changes not unlike those brought on by loss of a spouse through death.

From acknowledging that older persons experience challenges in their lives, but that these are not necessarily challenges that are unique to this age group and do not always fundamentally alter the lifestyles of individuals as one might expect, we now move on to look at ways that seniors conduct their lives socially and consider other themes that surfaced in the interviews.

## 6.4. Taking Initiative

The taking of initiative by research participants in meeting their social needs was one of the main themes that emerged from the research findings, a direct outcome of the study's qualitative approach. The desire to fill time and the inability to rely on others in doing so was mentioned frequently throughout the interviews. Ken described the change in lifestyle that accompanied his retirement:

*Moving into retirement is a big jump. Having every minute of the day and evening planned for you and thousands of worries hovering over your head all the time and suddenly you have a clean agenda (Ken, late 60s).*

In interview after interview, participants talked about not being able to count on other people to initiate social contact and of taking the responsibility on themselves. As Walter told me:

*Two things happen when you can't do the things you used to do. We were talking about no longer doing work, right? One is, either you have to phone somebody or make an effort to go out find an event ...Or, you sit by the phone and wait for someone to phone you. Well, the latter doesn't work. I mean from being a teenage girl to seniors. And my wife often*

*complains about this and we have this rather silly conversation and it goes "Nobody ever phones me" and I say "Well, when was the last time you phoned anybody" (Walter, late 70s)?*

This account is interesting not only because it explains the need to take initiative in one's social life; it also shows Walter's belief that his circumstances are not unlike those of a much younger person.

Libby too expressed the need to take charge of her own circumstances, explaining how she became involved with her neighbourhood seniors centre:

*And I say 'well, you have to do something for yourself.' So I get up and that's how I joined [the seniors centre]. Because it was either sitting home-- I was finished work, sitting home. I was still extremely active and it kind of broke my heart. So that's when I got out and made friends (Libby, mid 80s).*

As Libby describes, her initial effort to get involved at the seniors centre was circumstantially motivated by having extra free time after finishing paid work. However, this did not represent a one-time response to an event or set of circumstances. The quotation below depicts a continuing pattern of initiative lived out in her daily life:

*I get out every morning. If it goes to 9:30 and somebody hasn't phoned and said "Libby will you come over?", well, I go down and I'm gone (Libby, mid 80s).*

At one point in our conversation, Libby was talking about things that she used to do and how her injury had "brought her down." Nevertheless, she laughed as she told me that she would fight it and would be ok. As I began to suggest that it seemed that she still had things and activities to do, she cut me short and replied, "I make things" [to do].

Hazel echoes much of what was said by other participants, but suggests that her aloneness drives her "just do it" approach. In a study of this type and scale, it's impossible to generalize, for example, about the implications of married, single or widowed. Indeed, Walter, who is married, spoke about having to take responsibility and initiative in his life. Nevertheless, Hazel's comment is interesting. Her perspective on oldness is also noteworthy. Imagining what her life would be like without being able to participate in her neighbourhood programs and other activities, Hazel said:

*I think I would become a cabbage. I would just be sitting doing nothing or watching TV and it would be most depressing. I think you'd get old. I think the way you keep young is you have to make your tea. There's nobody to say "would you like a cup of tea". If you want a cup of tea, you ruddy well make one. So you have to do things...but maybe if I did have family or somebody, then I would not become active I would just wait for them to wait on me (laughs). There's a possibility you know. But when you have to do things you do it (Hazel, early 90s).*

Here, Hazel equates "young" with doing things and maintaining independence, as opposed to relying on others and sitting around, which she appears to associate with an older identity. In a sense, for her, not having people who she can depend on keeps her young.

Complicating the concepts of 'young' and 'old' is the experience of Eva, who showed a different kind of initiative in learning to drive at age sixty, following the death of her husband. The real and symbolic freedom, independence and mobility associated with driving, and so often thought of in relation to youth, came in her case, much later in life. Given that so much discourse on aging focuses on reduced mobility, linking this with reduced independence and opportunity, her experience deserves to be highlighted for the way in which it challenges common expectations.

The experiences relayed here bring to mind the reminder from Kim Boudiny (2012: 17) that "gains might also be seen in the context of loss, as older adults may unfold unexpected substitute skills, collaborative relationships or creative strategies to overcome limitations." That participants of different ages and circumstances showed themselves to be actively reflecting upon their lifestyle and social needs and taking control of meeting them suggests a need to consider ways in which expert voices of those speaking about seniors might leave further space for seniors to speak for themselves about their individual experiences.

The next sections look in greater depth at ways in which participants meet social needs in and outside of organized settings.

## 6.5. Organized Programs and Activities

Listening to participants speak about their involvement in organized activities and programs, it was clear that these were an important part of some participants' lives - though not necessarily the centerpieces that I expected. Some participants spoke highly of programs, instructors and staff and of the ways that their involvement in programs and activities was meaningful.

What would you say your various involvements – what do they mean to you? What do you get out of them? (Interviewer, LA)

*I think I'd put at the top of the list meeting interesting people (Walter, late 70s)*

Indeed, many participants said that participating in organized programs and activities was a way of meeting people, and several of those I spoke with sought to get involved for this reason. For a few participants who had moved to Vancouver from elsewhere, getting involved in programs was a way to make friends and settle into a new place.

Though it isn't clear whether Norma, who is herself mobile and still drives in her early 80s, would otherwise choose to spend time at neighbourhood seniors centres, still she spoke of them as places where she can count on meeting people she knows.

Where do you like to socialize? What are your favourite places to socialize? (Interviewer, LA)

*Well I don't have much choice, do I? (laughing). I have to go to where the people are that I know so I would have said the seniors centres (Norma, early 80s).*

Susan mentioned that she was sceptical about many of the programs offered for seniors locally, feeling that they might not provide enough challenge or interest for her. Below, she suggests that many of the "traditional" seniors' activities hold little appeal for her. However, her comment about the book club indicates that she appreciates the opportunity the club provides to share her likes and interests.

*And the book club, you know we don't always read the very best books but I manage to get something out of it. And we talk about books that we've read and so I have somebody to talk to about something that I*

*really liked. But a lot of the programs don't—you know I don't want to play Scrabble or bridge or—I'm just not—you know I like to do something that's stimulating (Susan, late 70s).*

For Hazel, who lives on her own and whose family is not close by, her involvement in social-based programs at the local community centre and Neighbourhood House provides an opportunity to be involved in others' lives and to stay in the loop. Her statement below suggests that the relationships fostered through participation hold particular significance for those living on their own:

*Well we share our life with them (laughing). We like to know what one another's doing...and then there's quite a few of us that don't have anybody. You know, so it's important (Hazel, early 90s).*

As mentioned earlier, many participants claimed not to see close friends often. Yet, they did not seem to be lacking social interaction. Those involved in various neighbourhood programs and activities spoke of opportunities to meet people and be in the company of others. Interestingly though, they tended to make clear distinctions between friends and program/activity acquaintances.

So the people you meet [at the seniors centre], would you call those people your friends? (Interviewer, LA)

*I would say acquaintances. Acquaintances because -- there's two I've gone out with...But we're not buddy buddies. Do you know what I mean? I call them acquaintances. It's a different .... (Libby, mid 80s).*

Walter also felt the need to qualify his use of the term "friends" in speaking about the people he knew from his involvement in programs:

*When I say "friends," I probably don't see most of those people in the handbell choir other than Wednesday afternoons. And the nice parties and socials that we have and the performances we have (Walter, late 70s).*

"Ivy" finds the people she encounters at her seniors centre friendly and interacts with them, but does not consider these contacts to be "friends."

And do you know quite a few people in the centre here? Do you sit with people at lunch and visit? (Interviewer, LA)

*Oh yeah...They're not my friends, but everybody here we're friendly. So if I sit at a table with two other people we always start a conversation (Ivy, early 80s).*

While Norma claimed to have formed friendships through her participation in organized programming, she notes that they are not close friendships:

*I've made some friends at the neighbourhood house and Kitsilano Community Centre and I have a friend that I met through quilting that somebody from Ontario knew and introduced me to so yeah, I wouldn't say they're close, close friends (Norma, early 80s).*

The distinction made between “friends” or close friends and people known through social involvements was striking because of the frequency with which it surfaced in the interviews and the way it stood in contrast to some of the literature on seniors centres, which promotes them as places where “strong, lasting friendships are formed” (Taylor-Harris & Zhan, 2011: 353). Interestingly, there is a parallel here with Noel Dyck’s (2012) ethnographic work on children’s sports, where kids and parents spoke about “sport relationships” that while significant, typically did not reach beyond the playing field. Dyck’s research builds on the theories of Basil Sansom (1980), who made a distinction between what he termed formal identities and consociate identities. In contrast to formal identities, which represent the most superficial form of group belonging, consociate identities (and by extension, relationships) are brought into being only through the accumulation of shared experiences and history. When this happens, Dyck claims, consociates may come to know quite a bit about one another’s lives, despite the fact that their relationships may remain relatively confined to the particular context in which they came to know one another. Nevertheless, meaningful exchanges can occur in these contexts and “the notion of [these types of friendships] need not, therefore, necessarily designate a superficial or inferior form of friendship” (Dyck, 2012: 68).

Susan spoke of programs providing social opportunities, which she didn’t necessarily feel inclined to pursue. At a few points during our interview, she mentioned that she could engage in various social activities, but that she hadn’t found anyone with whom she would want to spend more time.

*I mean I go to the book club and it's somewhat social and sometimes we have lunch after the book club. But you know it's like more—it's not*

*something I look forward to particularly...Well you know and I feel well, I ought to be you know somewhat social with these people – one of them is my downstairs neighbour, you know, that we ought to be friendly you know...*

Yeah. Like you wouldn't necessarily choose those people as your friends.  
(Interviewer, LA)

*No, no and they a lot of them they do get together and they do things together. They watch movies together and they go for dinner and I always say no. Cause I'm not that interested in spending time...*

*[later in conversation] Well if there was somebody I thought was really interesting in my exercise class, I wouldn't mind-- you know there were a couple of people that we would sometimes have lunch with after the exercise class or have coffee. And you know, I like them ok. I wouldn't want to spend more time with them but it was pleasant (Susan, late 70s).*

This is an important finding because its deviation from or qualification of the normative suggestion that social interaction is always good and desirable. Susan's comments in the interview suggested that social interaction for the sole sake of interaction is not always an appealing choice for everyone and that organized programs in some cases, might even create a sense of pressure or obligation to pursue unwanted deeper relationships.

### **6.5.1. Social Leveraging and The Strength of Weak Ties**

Gwen brought up something that I didn't hear from many others about their participation in organized programming. She relayed that her involvement provided her with connections that gave her practical help during a time of need – in her case, after having surgeries that impacted her mobility and ability to get places:

*And then all of the things that I do like the choir and the handbells and all that. Those are people that you know--and —after I had my surgeries I used some of them for drives...you know (Gwen, early 70s).*

The idea of finding help or having needs met indirectly through involvement in organized neighbourhood programming was something that I thought I might hear more about. It has been noted that involved seniors are generally more likely to seek help (Holmes and Joseph, 2011: 3) and the role of centres in connecting seniors to resources and support

is highlighted in the literature (Kirk, Waldrop and Rittner, 2008). Moreover, simple engagement in activity may provide opportunities and benefits that extend well beyond what is directly provided by the focal activity itself. For instance, ethnographic research into Chicago's black nightlife has shown how the nightclub setting serves as a venue for social support and leveraging. Aside from meaningful and supportive friendships, patrons claimed that the club setting facilitated access to information about job leads, childcare and resources provided by social service agencies and government programs (Hunter, 2006). In these instances, the nightclub functioned as much more than a space for music, dancing and meeting potential partners; it was a venue for interactions that might otherwise take place in offices, employment agencies, schools, daycares or any number of places where people interact with one another to fulfill needs. Significantly, it was a place that connected people with social leveraging opportunities, or the potential to somehow improve their position. This finding supports the theoretical work of Mark Granovetter (1973) who argued convincingly that "weak ties" or those relationships that are less frequent, less intimate and less intense often serve as important "bridges," connecting individuals and groups to other actors and resources to which they would not otherwise have access directly, or indirectly through their network of stronger ties. While a study of older residents in neighbourhood settings may seem far removed from black nightlife in Chicago, I was interested in finding out whether similar dynamics were at work in my research setting. It seemed quite conceivable, even likely, that program and facility settings might provide comparable benefits for the seniors who frequent them.

In the end, I heard relatively little that was overtly reminiscent of the kinds of leveraging that took place in the nightclub setting, though it is possible that people didn't automatically make these associations. The goal of the research was to learn about the significance of neighbourhood programming and activities for older adults by listening to them speak in their own words about things that came to mind. Perhaps if I had asked more directly about times when they had received help, I would have received more responses like Gwen's. This said, by listening to what people told me and by observing participants in program settings, I could infer that indirect needs were being met that weren't explicitly spoken about in those terms.

In general, I found that organized programs provide structure, things to do, opportunities to learn, practice and share skills or engage in the arts. Perhaps most significantly though, they provide a setting in which to meet and interact with people. This is neatly reflected in a statement from Gwen. Though heavily involved in various activities and volunteer roles, she said of her social life, “I’m mainly with people, not going to things.” This is not to take away from the significance of more structured activities; certainly, participants had many positive things to share about their involvement and some others, I could infer from other things they told me. Libby told me that she and a couple of other women planned to attend a funeral for the husband of a woman they knew through their involvement in a program. In telling me, she made a point of clarifying that these were acquaintances more than friends. This suggested to me that organized activities and programs were places where people – even people who weren’t necessarily close – became aware of things that were happening in others’ lives and could offer and receive support. To come back to Sansom’s (1980) theory, it was a place where consociate relationships were formed.

Aside from perceptions that programs for seniors would not meet interests, or be challenging enough, there were a few negative comments made about the social or program atmospheres in organized settings. In a couple of cases, these related to cliqueness – a topic explored by Kirk, Waldrop and Rittner (2001) but that one participant pointed out was not an issue confined to older people’s social groups. Another fundamental grievance from a participant of one centre concerned the feeling that younger staff members were out of touch with what older people wanted. She noted that there was no effort to find out what activities seniors would like and that what was currently being offered was certainly not what they wanted. In regard to the educational component of one of the programs offered at a centre, a participant stated, “now we just go listen to people talk about things that we’ve been listening to for sixty years.” This again suggested a misalignment of participant interests and needs, on the one hand, with what programmers perhaps presumed to be of interest and/or need to them, on the other. Of course, personal interests and needs are highly variable and it is not my intention here to allow one or two individuals to speak on behalf of their program peers. What is intended is to highlight the feeling among at least some participants that some

programs are not meeting the needs of those these aim to serve. This ought to prompt further consideration of ways in which programming decisions and rationales are made.

## 6.6. Unstructured Activity

Whether participants displayed outgoing tendencies or leaned toward introversion, they relayed that they enjoyed the opportunity to be around other people in structured or informal settings. In fact, the number of times people mentioned participating in, or preferring casual, unstructured activity was notable. Going out for walks, coffee or meeting friends for lunch or dinner were favourite activities among participants of varying age.

Hazel, who described herself as “part of the furniture” at the coffee shop kitty-corner from her building, has been visiting at the same time every day for about ten years.

*I go for coffee every day (laughs), and it's sort of like a social gathering.*

*Mostly I just go over and have a cup of coffee and a slice of toast and wait for different people to come in and sit with me [laughing] (Hazel, early 90s).*

For her, the coffee shop provides a social atmosphere where she can count on opportunities for interaction.

When I asked Sharon about her favourite ways of socializing, she answered with the following:

*Eat [laughs]. Yeah, I like going to different kinds of restaurants and, uh, being with people I know or people I don't know (Sharon, early 70s).*

When I asked her later about places that were meaningful or significant for her, she answered that one of them would probably be the local White Spot. Asked why, she responded:

*It's one of the places you can go where you don't – where you can go by yourself and you don't feel like why am I here? You don't feel out of place (Sharon, early 70s).*

Sharon's last statement reflects the feeling felt by people of all ages of discomfort or awkwardness being alone in certain settings. Yet, the desire to be alone in the presence of others is commonly felt. Often, participants expressed that they enjoyed simply being alone in places that offered an opportunity to be around people and the possibility of interaction. For instance, Norma talked about the small park and playground area near her complex:

*I like living here it's nice and you can walk out in the park and you can speak to somebody. People will stop and talk to you. Or you can go while the children are playing and sit on those little seats and someone will come and talk to you. And people from (a local retirement complex) they walk around there (Norma, early 80s).*

Similarly, Marie enjoys a local coffee shop as a place to be with a friend, or on her own amidst strangers:

*Cause the Starbucks up on Cambie and 8th there. That's a neat spot to be in the summer. You can sit outside and sit there with a friend or you just sit there and somebody will come sit beside you in the sun and it's nice (Marie, early 80s).*

Even within organized programs, participants seemed to enjoy the opportunities they provided for casual interaction. Some people mentioned the coffee breaks that took place during organized programs and from the time I spent recruiting and interviewing at one seniors centre, I observed this to be a lively and well-enjoyed interlude. Correlating with other research which has noted the potential for frustration when opportunities for socializing are constrained (Dal Santo, 2009; Salari, Brown and Eaton, 2006), Hazel even expressed frustration that her weekly drop-in program was too structured, inhibiting the chance to socialize at a leisurely pace.

*It doesn't seem to be a social organization now. We go there and we have [lunch] and then we have somebody speak a few words of advice and then we have [an activity] for 5 or 10 minutes and then we always have a speaker come in. And there's no sociability within the group. I mean we're so busy we hardly finish eating and these other things are going on (Hazel, early 90s).*

Another participant similarly complained that a current events discussion group she had been involved in was so structured that it inhibited the chance to share and exchange ideas. She likened the situation to being treated like children, in that discussion group members were told when they had exceeded the time allotted to them to speak.

Interviews showed that to a large extent, needs met in organized settings were also met informally. Certainly, Hazel's case highlights that special facilities and programs are not needed to facilitate interaction, although she herself does make use of them and some people certainly indicated that they find them supportive in this regard. Other benefits associated with programs, such as physical activity, were also created by participants in their own ways. Eva, for example, follows her own exercise program at home, while she also considers the work that she does in her garden to be part of keeping physically active. Susan told me that she occasionally finds herself making excuses to go to the store in order to make sure she gets out for walks. She also described as "great fun" her shopping trips to a local grocery store, explaining that she enjoyed seeing what produce was available, checking out the sales and making selections. The act of grocery shopping, seen by many as a mundane undertaking for survival, was for her, a meaningful and highly enjoyable activity. In fact, when I asked her about places that were most significant for her, Susan ranked this particular store along with the local fitness centre and places in and around her home that held memories of loved ones. This finding supports the claim by Katz (2000) that older adults' social activities are not necessarily constrained to the more easily measured activities promoted by professionals and academics.

What I heard from participants about their engagement in and enjoyment of unstructured activity highlighted their capacity to create opportunities by themselves and with others for themselves. In this way, they were active in shaping lifestyles and relationships that were enjoyable and meaningful for them and that fit their particular circumstances.

## 6.7. Volunteer Work

Volunteer work is a distinctive kind of involvement that warrants discussion on its own. In a way, it might be thought of as occupying space between organized and informal activity – or, between work and leisure. Some of the individuals I spoke with had taken on volunteer roles after retirement, while others were continuing a long history of volunteerism. Several participants spoke of volunteer roles they held and the fulfillment they derived from these. Like other activities, volunteer work was described as a social opportunity, as well as a means of filling time:

*When you do volunteer work, you meet friends (Ivy, early 80s).*

*I took up volunteer work with originally four, now two, organizations. So I'm still doing that. That provides a social component as well as giving a bit of a schedule in my life (Ken, late 60s).*

Participants also described other ways in which they found deeper meaning from their involvement. For instance, Gwen, who helps with various musical groups, explained that volunteer work is not only about helping others; it also provides an opportunity to share a talent and a hobby that she loves:

*I like to share with other people if I can. You know they need help so—and they're grateful, you know. At least that's what they tell me... So I really like sharing my music though, I do (Gwen, early 70s).*

Similarly, Walter, who voice records library materials for use by the vision-impaired, explained what he gets out of his experience of volunteering:

*We all get quite a charge I think out of not just for our own interest, keeping the brain going, cause we read some pretty dull stuff. We just read the Bible, the Koran another holy book and the Criminal Code of Canada in total (laughs)... But we do some interesting stuff. There will be some people reading a lot of these Alice Munro novels that are not yet on tape. But also with feeling-- you know we are helping other people who are less blessed than us in this one area of being able to read and understand text (Walter, early 80s).*

While volunteer work clearly provided opportunities for in-person interaction, some participants, like Walter, were engaged in volunteer work that was more “behind the

scenes” and solitary in nature. This led me to wonder whether there was something inherently social about engaging in an activity to help others, even when those people happen to be strangers. Certainly, when Walter talks about the “feeling” he gets from knowing he is helping someone this implies a type of social connection that, while not in-person, is meaningful. Sharon’s example provides a means of exploring this further. She told me about volunteering for an organization that helps families in need. Throughout the year, she invests significant amounts of time, money and energy into purchasing and knitting items for men, women and children whom she will likely never meet.

*I know a lot of people get a lot of benefit out of it. I always think -- you know especially with the kids, and usually I write a little note to the child that's getting the bear explaining that I've had the bear for a while and I explain that he's going to a new home and he's so excited. It's so hokey, I know.*

But kids love that (Interviewer, LA).

*I say “he doesn't have a name, so you find a really cool name for him.” And I think that if only one child out there says “you know something – someone who didn't even know me put this together just for me,” maybe that means something.*

Yeah. I'm sure it does (Interviewer, LA).

*You know? 'Cause a lot of these kids have nothing. And a lot of these moms-- and some of them are in drug and rehab. And if we don't support them and encourage them, how do we expect a different outcome? So anyway, that's my time filler (Sharon, early 70s).*

This quote shows clearly the intention and the focus on a real person who Sharon sees herself as helping. Through the note she includes with each child’s gift, she quite literally “speaks” to each recipient. It would be easy to imagine the same exchange happening between a grandparent and grandchild. Further, she sees the work she does for mothers as providing support and encouragement – both inherently social offerings.

The significance of volunteering and its distinction from other types of work or leisure activities is illustrated by the following quotation from Walter, which also clearly explains that he views volunteer work as distinct from other activities. He seems to see it as almost a responsibility.

*There's a lot of things in society that would not run if it were not for seniors volunteering. So that's important to me and if any one of those activities...shut down, I would be looking for something similar, rather than just picking up another sport or another musical instrument to give back to, you know (Walter, early 80s).*

Volunteering has been shown in the literature to provide a number of benefits for seniors, while underscoring the capacity of older adults to contribute to society and to their own lives. It also represents a focus on seniors' social activity that is not necessarily contained within specific programming initiatives for seniors. Nonetheless, one author notes the lack of attention given by researchers to informal volunteering by seniors, such as in caregiving roles (Bradley, 1999). Indeed, a couple of interview participants mentioned helping to care for grandchildren, and I suspect that these types of roles may consume more time and effort than was made apparent through the interviews. Noting how volunteer roles served to motivate some seniors by offering opportunities to contribute to their communities, personal development or by providing structure to daily lives (Bradley, 1999), the same author provides a connection to another theme that surfaced in the interviews – that of motivation.

## **6.8. Motivation**

The theme of taking the initiative in one's life, presented earlier, connects with another theme that came through in some interviews; that of finding or maintaining motivation. A few interview participants mentioned that involvement in regular social activities, both organized and casual, provided motivation to get out and do things. As Walter said "it's comfortable to be in your house and not to go anywhere." And yet, most acknowledged that getting out was important and necessary. For instance, Hazel spoke about her daily coffee shop ritual:

*It makes you get up in the morning and have your shower and do your exercises and then you have to go for coffee (Hazel, early 90s).*

Susan, who is involved in an exercise class and a book club, and who also participates in a language exchange,<sup>9</sup> talked about what her life might be like without these activities.

So how do you think your life would be affected if you didn't have these things – like the conversations, the classes – how would your life be different? (Interviewer, LA)

*Well, it would be I think a lot less interesting. I mean the other things I do –In the summer I do a little bit of gardening but I can't do anything like that now. It's not a great passion of mine. You know I just go up and putter around. And I spend a lot of time reading. And in the evening usually I watch you know some movie on television. Now I'm exploring the potential of Netflix. So I'd spend so much more time reading and watching television. It would be—well, since my son is here it would be somewhat – you know I would be less dependent on those contacts. But you know they're really important in – you know, giving me something to look forward to... yeah (Susan, late 70s).*

Susan's comments suggest the motivational role of activities in giving her “something to look forward to.” It's not that her life is empty without them, just “a lot less interesting,” in her words. Her response also suggests that activities – or more accurately, those “contacts” she makes through her participation – fill a gap that is otherwise only partially filled by family or closer contacts.

## **6.9. Maintaining Distance**

An interesting finding that emerged from a couple of interviews was that of reluctance of older adults to invite friends or acquaintances into one's home. Certainly, not everyone expressed this hesitation and some people spoke about having people over for coffee or for dinner. Nevertheless, it was a strong theme in a couple of interviews and warrants consideration here.

The inclination of seniors to maintain distance in this way is particularly interesting when considered in relation to the literature and frequently encountered

<sup>9</sup> In this case, the language exchange paired Susan (a non-native Spanish-speaker) with a younger Spanish speaker who wanted to practice his English skills. The two would meet informally in coffee shops or go for walks and would engage in conversational English and Spanish.

popular discourses about aging. The prevailing idea that as people age, their lives become increasingly focused on the home as mobility is restricted, might suggest that the home would constitute a comfortable and preferred setting for social interaction. Yet, it has already been shown here that there is wide variation in how people experience aging physically and interview participants demonstrated considerable ability to travel, regardless of their physical circumstances.

The following exchange with Libby provides insight into the theme of maintaining distance:

*People who are older don't mix so much (Libby, mid 80s).*

Why do you think that is? (Interviewer, LA)

*I don't know. I think it's fear of not being able to bring people—not that they're—what's the word...not able to entertain people. Like to their houses. Like we just said "oh, come on over." They don't do that now...I find that nobody here – I've never been asked to anybody's house here. Or I've never asked anybody...They will meet in restaurants. We meet in Bean Brothers. Or I'll meet you in such a restaurant or I'll meet you—but never, ever—there's one lady that we had and I had to bring her over wool or something. She's in an apartment so I rang the bell and she said "ok Libby," I opened the door "but when you come to my apartment...just leave the wool outside the door." ... Do they think that you're going to say "oh my god you live here?" I don't know...Honest to god I have no clue of why I do it too. I think I do it because I prefer to be out.*

Do you think maybe there's sort of a fear of commitment? Like if you invite someone into your house, the friendship might become more demanding? Like it might take more effort than you want to put into it? (Interviewer, LA)

*No. I don't think that. I think it's fear that they might say "oh, this is not what I expected of her." That's what I think. Or, "do I have to ask her back?" Or, "I wonder what she's going to give me with a cup of tea."*

There's sort of a sense of obligation...(Interviewer, LA)

*That's exactly it. I really think—or I've often thought about that. Like I'm 10 years here and nobody's asked me and I have not asked anybody (Libby, mid 80s).*

Norma claimed to prefer to socialize with friends in the home, finding it more relaxing, but found that others were less inclined to do so:

*Whether it's that they don't want to be bothered to cook, but I mean they don't want to invite you up for coffee either. They'll meet you outside for coffee but they won't invite you for coffee (Norma, early 80s).*

Norma told me that when she was younger and raising her children in eastern Canada, she belonged to a social group that would get together at one another's home for parties and potlucks. Her continuing preference to socialize at home would, if viewed from a life course perspective, likely be attributed to this preference developed and acted out throughout the years.

In *The Great Good Place* (1989), sociologist Ray Oldenburg wrote about the social dynamic described here, arguing the importance of what he termed "third places," for all community dwellers. He suggests that these non-work, non-home places, which could include coffee shops, cafes or other neighbourhood places where people gather, fill a crucial void, providing accessible, neutral spaces that among other things, place visitors on an equal level with one another and facilitate interaction in a convivial atmosphere.

In the circumstances described by Libby and Norma, "third places" might fill a significant role in facilitating social relationships and interaction, where, to reference Libby's comments, there is no obligation and no basis for judgement. The discovery of the value of these places emerged from my approach of seeking to understand the lives of participants in their fullness, as they described them to me.

## **6.10. Feeling Busy, Feeling Satisfied**

This study has aimed to challenge frequently encountered preconceptions of seniors as lonely, isolated and as lacking social fulfillment. While some interviews produced passing references to loneliness, it by no means emerged as a dominant or overarching theme. Rather, many participants expressed satisfaction with their social lives and the interaction they had with others.

Many of the seniors I spoke with, regardless of age or physical ability, told me that they lead busy lives:

*Um, well it seems to me that I'm always very busy (laughs) (Hazel, early 90s).*

Gwen claimed she lacked time to read and to go through the magazines that her neighbour brings her:

*I read books too – mainly novels, you know. But not too many of those because I just don't have time (Gwen, early 70s).*

Participants who claimed to be busy also claimed to be content spending time on their own. Of course, as recent work on active aging has picked up on, the two are not mutually exclusive (Boudiny, 2012). The finding that older persons with varying levels of interaction in their everyday lives might be content with their social lives, speaks to a need for further research to reassess the varying social needs of seniors and to consider the emphasis that is placed on social engagement among this age group. Without a doubt, social interaction was found to hold significance in the lives of those participants I spoke with. However, they generally seemed to understand their own social needs and to be structuring their lives accordingly.

*Isn't it funny it's just—I've always been a loner. And you find a lot of women my age that are alone, enjoy being alone (Marie, early 80s).*

*Um, I am a loner. I don't need to socialize at all. I do most of it for – besides the sports – I do a lot of it you know for (my partner's) sake because she's very, very outgoing. I'm more introverted that way. I can just sit and meditate and read a book and become self-absorbed for hours and hours on end (Eric, late 60s).*

Eva described a kind of social engagement that goes well beyond activities and programs and intentional participation. It is a sense of belonging to a place that she described comes from being present in the neighbourhood, knowing neighbours and visiting local shops - from, quite simply, life in the presence of others.

*I get a feeling of fitting in to –it's like a matrix, where you live is kind of like a matrix. And it has to do with culture, it has to do with age, it has to do with being –you know liking people and getting along with people and all*

*of that, and, um, I'm not an incredibly gregarious person, I don't need, you know, interaction all the time but I like to feel part of the matrix. (Eva, early 70s)*

## Chapter 7.

### Conclusion

*For me, I don't need an age-friendly neighbourhood. I'm not here because it's age-friendly. If it were that age-friendly, I'd probably wanna leave (laughing). If they treated everybody like an old fogey (Nathan, late 60s).*

This study began by outlining some commonly encountered claims and assumptions about the lives and experiences of older individuals. These include representations of older adults as being at risk of social isolation and loneliness, and managing in the face of inevitable decline. These widely embraced portrayals inform research questions and methodologies and underpin professional efforts to meet the needs of people in this demographic category while addressing the “public problem” of an aging population.

In this study, Nathan stands clearly counter to the image of the older person portrayed in much aging discourse. His bold statement above is effective in illustrating one of the main findings of this research: that the perceptions, challenges, experiences, needs and desires of older adults are in no way uniform and neither are the ways that they model their lifestyles to meet these particularities. Certainly, some older persons experience challenges that can put limitations on their lives and social involvement. Nevertheless, these challenges are by no means experienced by all and not in the same ways.

Though not ground-breaking in its questioning of dominant discourses and its assertion of the variation of experiences among aging individuals, this study makes a modest but important contribution by letting the lives of some older individuals living in Vancouver challenge the too-easy application of commonly encountered but not always reliable assumptions about their age category. In addition to not necessarily identifying

with the category of “old” and what tends to be commonly associated with being old, participants showed themselves to be highly adaptable in meeting social and recreational needs in spite of any limitations they may have been dealing with.

A central theme emerging from the interviews conducted for this study was that of taking initiative. This theme is very significant in the context of this study, which considers commonly encountered discourses of aging. This is because so much of the literature on aging presents seniors as helpless victims of inevitable circumstances and casts organizations, programs and policies as their saviours. I encountered little in the literature about how older adults create their own social lives outside of organized settings, yet those I spoke with were actively doing so. Had the study relied on a survey that overlooked this possibility because it presumed the likelihood of incapacity rather than initiative among seniors, then important findings such as the ways in which the people whom I interviewed often took initiative likely would have remained obscured.

The participants of this study enjoy a range of activities and opportunities for interaction. For some, programs and activities for seniors offer structure and a way to fill time, along with valued opportunities to meet and interact with people. However, it was surprising that participants tended not to consider their participation in seniors programs as providing opportunities to form close friendships. Organized programs and spaces were also not as important as I expected in helping people meet needs indirectly, though this may happen more than my research suggested.

The qualitative approach of this study, adopted in order to understand the significance of organized programs within the context of individuals’ whole lives, allowed other significant and relevant findings to emerge. Beyond the confines of organized neighbourhood offerings, participants frequently conveyed the enjoyment they derived from simply being in the presence of people in casual settings. Whether meeting for coffee, observing life around them, engaging in spontaneous interaction with strangers, or feeling a sense of belonging by knowing and being known by neighbours and local businesses, informal activity was particularly meaningful. And, as Daisy’s coffee shop experience shows, it can be at least as regular and routine as more “organized” forms of participation. Volunteering also occupied a distinct and meaningful place in the lives of

participants. All of this suggests that greater emphasis should be placed on the agency and choice exercised by individuals – in terms of their formal and informal activities.

While the vast majority of participants claimed to be generally content with their social lives and level of interaction, some suggested that regular contact with close friends and family can be difficult. Local opportunities for social interaction may fill a void in this regard , allowing opportunities for casual friendship and interaction that do not necessarily require much effort, commitment or personal investment. Related to this was the finding from a couple of interviews that people - even friends – sometimes prefer to maintain a certain distance in their relationships. While the reason for this was unclear, it suggests that meeting places – whether formally programmed spaces or informal social settings like coffee shops can serve an important function as “neutral” space for people to meet. Since this study did not seek to create a representative sample, a quantitative study focusing on the degree of satisfaction with one’s social circumstances could be employed to assess the extent to which the themes that emerged from this study may or may not exist more broadly. Indeed, this study provides an example of ways in which qualitative research might be used to inspire future quantitative studies that can produce statistically representative findings relating to the more general themes that arose here.

In this study, interview participants seemed to manage in all of their various circumstances to create socially fulfilling lives for themselves. This is not to say that more cannot be done to support individuals in their neighbourhoods as they grow older. Interviews suggested that the social lives of older adults can be supported in neighbourhoods that offer a range of activities, services, amenities and meeting places easily accessible by walking and transit. Mixed use zoning and planning would support this diversity. Focus might also be put toward making transit more accessible for people with mobility issues in order to support them in getting comfortably where they want to go. These alternatives address root issues of mobility, access and choice, thereby increasing options for all people, not just older adults. A question was raised earlier in this study pertaining to the City of Vancouver’s *Age-Friendly Action Plan*. Noting that many of the physical, mental, emotional and social issues attributed to seniors are also faced by people in other demographic categories, I questioned whether action plans that focus on age-based categories diminish capacity to most effectively meet the diverse

needs contained within an urban population. Action plans that focus on accessibility and comfort issues in general, rather than for seniors, are not only likely to benefit other demographics but are likely to meet the needs of more seniors as well. This approach would also avoid the trap of characterizing needs on the basis of age categories.

In addition to achieving its objectives, this research raises potential avenues for further research. Though not by design, all of the interview participants for this study live independently. While this study did not attract any participants who live in group living (i.e. assisted living/retirement complex) situations, it would be interesting to explore ways in which the meeting of social needs among these residents might differ from or resemble those of residents living on their own within neighbourhoods. Also, several participants spoke about change within their neighbourhoods; some of these changes were received positively – such as the observation of having more children and young families around. Other changes, like the loss of familiar businesses and the influx of new neighbours who seemed less “invested” in the neighbourhood were perceived negatively by some. While participants generally seemed to adapt to, if not embrace these changes, it would be interesting to ask long-term residents about the history and nature of their neighbourhood relationships (i.e. with neighbours) and to explore whether a diminishing of this aspect of social life contributes in some cases to a higher value being placed on organized programs and activities. Though I expected this might be the case, it did not come out clearly in this research project. It would also be worthwhile to explore how family relationships fit into and affect the social lives of older adults. In this study, family was given only limited focus. These potential avenues of exploration raise questions about diversity within the category of senior that may be well-explored using the intersectionality approach urged by authors Koehn and Kobayashi (2011). This approach is useful in considering “the simultaneous interactions between multiple dimensions of social identity...that are contextualized within broader systems” (Koehn & Kobayashi, 2011, 136). By looking at ways in which circumstances and needs might differ, for example, among and between younger and older seniors, male and female seniors, and seniors of varying ethnic backgrounds, Koehn and Kobayashi suggest that it is possible to achieve a “theoretical and methodological counterbalance to the tendency of much research to reproduce the essentialising and ‘othering’ that occurs in society” (Koehn & Kobayashi, 2011, 137).

The review of organizational and expert discourse for this study highlighted, to some degree, conflicting ideas about the nature of later life and appropriate ways of accommodating individuals within this period. On one hand, there is an expressed recognition that older adults are diverse, active, engaged and contributing members of society. On the other hand, persistent stereotypes remain ever-present in research publications and in the professional discourses of senior-serving organizations. These are, to use Gulløvs words, “kept alive through the unreflected repetition of everyday life” (Gulløvs, 2003). To be fair, some older adults do face challenges of isolation, loneliness and declining health, and these challenges certainly deserve attention. However, a central point to be made by this study is that the experiences of these few (if they are, in fact, just a few) do not represent the experiences of all, and should not be allowed to become the unquestioned discourses to be applied to all members of an entire demographic category. Academic research is needed that not only gives passing claim to seniors who defy stereotypes, but seeks them out and highlights their experiences.

As the demographic shift toward an older population continues, there will be a pressing need to take account of what is needed to accommodate this shift. This will involve ongoing assessment of the needs of older adults, an understanding of the ways in which they as individuals navigate their daily lives, and an understanding of the varying kinds of support that would be helpful in allowing them to achieve the particular lifestyles they desire. Ethnographic methods allow for an informed appreciation of the extent of variation in seniors’ lives and aspirations. Inviting people to speak for themselves requires that we develop approaches to research that suitably equip us to listen and take account of their differences from one another, rather than defining them and seeking to fit them into ‘one-size-fits-all’ understandings and ‘solutions.’ Research incorporating participatory action methods could provide a further opportunity to involve older adults as research partners, helping to define research questions, carry out research and make practical use of findings. In this way, some suggest it might be possible to realize “a power shift from academic institutions to communities, with participants becoming more than subjects of study” (Blair & Minkler, 2009, 652). To the extent that this study has suggested the need for new lines of inquiry that can lead to a fuller, more nuanced perspective that can inform sound planning and policy-making, it will hopefully have rewarded the contributions that the research participants made to it.

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# Appendix

## Interview Guide

- May I begin by asking your age? Are you retired? If so, for how long have you been retired?
- How did you come to live in this neighbourhood? Where did you live previously? What prompted moving from these other places (employment, family, etc)? What kinds of things did you consider in choosing this neighbourhood?
- Can you please tell me about your living situation? Do you live alone? (If not, with whom?) Do you have relatives, long-term friends, or recently made friends nearby? And do you see them?
- How would you describe this neighbourhood? Has it changed in the time you've been here? How has it changed? How do you feel about this? Have you had to adapt to these changes in any way? What has helped you adapt?
- What programs and activities you are involved in now and have you been involved with in the past? Are you involved in more or fewer programs today than in the past? Tell me about what this involvement means for you? How would your life be affected if you were no longer able to participate?
- What is a typical week like for you? How do you get to these activities and outings [that the respondent has identified]? Do you encounter any difficulties in getting to these?
- Of the time you spend outside of your home, how much is spent within the neighbourhood vs. elsewhere?
- How do you imagine your lifestyle and activities might change in the next 5 or 10 years?
- What are your favourite ways of socializing? What do you like to do? Where and with whom? Is there anything you'd like to change about your social life?
- Are there any places or events you would like to go to but find it difficult to do so? Tell me more about these places and events. Tell me more about why it is difficult to go to them.
- If I asked you to envision an age-friendly neighbourhood, what would that look like to you?
- Is there anything else you'd like to tell me relating to the things we've talked about?