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Aging Well: Constructing Identity with Special Things

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the

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Abstract

Aging well is a process of making sense of later-life change relative to self. In this three-paper dissertation, I begin by constructing a narrative of aging-well theorizing. An underlying assumption characterizes the theorizing of the last half-century: to age well is to achieve self-integration in relation to particular levels of resources and activity. Yet, recent theorizing is being shaped by the study of identity construction amid later-life change. Accordingly, aging well may be described as a meaning-making process that occurs in context, including time, society, social networks, and physical objects. In the second paper, I introduce a materialist lens to aging-well research to study identity construction as it occurs between people and special possessions. Past study of person-object relations has focused on the assignment of meaning to things; little attention has been given to how the materiality of objects influences meaning-making. Three key assumptions, as distilled in the second paper, are applied in the third paper to exploratory, qualitative interviews with five Canadian women (75+ years) living in the community. Three sub-themes revolve around an overarching theme. First, special things are unique physical relationships of people and objects. Second, they provide physical access to meaning. Third, special things are physically demanding. Overall, participants indicate that they physically need to keep a few special things until death. When participants and these things become so interdependent with their meaning, "integration" results. Without the person, object, and/or

the meaning, a sense of loss of self may occur. Yet, participants downplay the importance of these special things. This materialist ambivalence may be a reflection of: (a) a later-life perspective, (b) a Western norm that people should be concerned only with the intangible, and/or (c) a generational, gender effect that family and friends, not things, should be valued. This materialist lens highlights a phenomenon, materialist ambivalence, not previously studied in aging-well research. Further, integration may prove to be a useful concept in future materialist theorizing in terms of age and gender. Aging well may not only be about making sense of self and of aging but also about embracing one's interdependence with a physical world.

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The women who opened their homes to me,
Thank you for sharing your special things, your lives, and how you are making sense of self and of aging...
That I might pass your generosity on to fellow seekers...

Norah Keating, my Doctoral Mentor, for
"...cast[ing] light on the way ahead, interpret[ing] arcane signs, warn[ing] [us] of lurking dangers, and point[ing] out unexpected delights along the way. There is a certain luminosity about them [mentors], and they often pose as magicians in tales of transformation, for *magic* is a word given to what we cannot see – and we can rarely see across the gulf."[1]

My Family, my Circle,
Thank you...
for sharing this journey in all its dimensions!
for sharing how to trust, to leap, and to fly!

[1] Daloz, L. A. (1999). *Mentor: Guiding the journey of adult learners* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, pp. 18-19.

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Overview – Embracing Materiality in Later Life

Aging is living through time. As we age, the physical, mental, social, emotional, and financial resources with which we live may change. The activities that we do may vary. We may experience such events and transitions as retirement, widowhood, home downsizing, and/or increasing frailty. Aging well is an ongoing process of living with these changes in ways that make sense to our selves. Aging well is an open-ended process in which we make sense of who we are. Aging well is a meaning-making process that occurs in multiple contexts, including time, society, social networks, and physical objects. The physical context of aging well is a key dimension of this dissertation.

I began this work by considering the meaning of aging well. Constructing an historical and conceptual narrative of aging-well research from the last half-century, I realized that an underlying assumption characterizes past theorizing: to age well is to achieve an end-state of self-integration in relation to particular levels of resources and activity. Yet, recent theorizing is being shaped by a growing interest in later-life meaning-making, particularly in ongoing identity construction.

To enhance understanding of meaning-making around self and aging, I then introduced a materialist lens to aging-well research. A materialist lens is a theoretical perspective that directs researchers to see the materiality of physical objects. I synthesized and articulated key theoretical assumptions from across such areas as human ecology, gerontology,

material culture studies, anthropology, history, and sociology. My application of these assumptions to interview data suggests that some older adults may become so interdependent with a few special objects that those things may play a critical role in aging well. Long-time relationships with a few special things may be the basis for meaning-making about self and aging. For this reason, some older adults may need to keep such things until the ends of their lives. Building on early aging-well theorizing around the achievement of self-integration (Erikson, 1963, pp. 268-274; Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986, p. 52; Mead, 1934, pp. 142-144), I now consider that aging well may be not only about making sense of self and aging but also an issue of embracing one's interdependence with a physical world over time.

Embracing materiality in Western society may be more easily said than done. We are characterized by mass production, the planned obsolescence of consumer items, and mass consumption. However, even as we have become ever more consumer-oriented over the last four centuries, some parts of society have advocated against the overvaluing of material things (Jones & Stallybrass, 2000, pp. 9-10). This is evident in my data in which older women, who have lived through a century in which consumer goods have been both plentiful and hard-to-come-by, demonstrate a puzzling ambivalence. Each of the women has observed that material things "don't matter" (Irene[1]); rather, people and social relationships are what

[1] To ensure privacy, I assigned pseudonyms to all participants and individuals that they named.

should be valued in life (Gwen). However, the participants have also indicated that they plan to keep one or two special things until the ends of their lives. As Hannah has said, "They're my life". In other words, these few things *do* matter.

Herein lies a tension that I had not anticipated when I applied a materialist lens to these data. I assumed that this theoretical perspective would direct my attention to participants' relationships with special things. I deliberately wished to see participants' cherished objects and to hear their perceptions of their relationships with these things. I assumed that: (a) participants and objects would be interdependent; (b) I would need to study them in relationship; and (c) I should consider these relationships in larger contexts of history and society. I did not anticipate this ambivalence between a need to keep a special thing physically close until death and an equally determined view that things "are only things after all" (Sophie).

Working back and forth between my understanding of aging well, materialist theorizing, and the data has proven to be an invaluable approach. Since the early Enlightenment and the emergence of capitalist society in the 1600s, Westerners have conceptualized physical objects as secondary to humanity, part of a context which we have sought to master and have taken for granted (Brown, 2004; de Grazia, Quilligan, & Stallybrass, 1996; Jones & Stallybrass, 2000, p. 2; Tiffany, 2004). The thinking has been that humans were supposed to rise above mundane physicality to focus on the intangibility of such issues as moral behaviour (Jones & Stallybrass, 2000,

p. 7). Yet, by doing so, we have in effect denied that humans live in physical landscapes with nature and human-made things (Brown, 2004; de Grazia et al., 1996; Stallybrass & Jones, 2004). We have disregarded the physicality of our selves, though this is changing (Graves-Brown, 2000; Harper, 1997; Katz, 1999; Morell, 2003; Twigg, 2004; Woodward, 1984). Even as we communicate with each other through, for example, the style of clothes we wear, the types of food we eat, and the monuments we leave behind, we have lost sight of humans' reciprocal relationships with things (de Grazia et al., 1996; Latour, 2004).

In recent years, materialist theorists have argued that conceptualizing meaning-making as the assignment of meaning by humans to objects is limiting because objects influence meaning-making. Based on its nature and shape, an object "afford[s]" (Gibson, 1979, pp. 138-139) or enables humans to take particular types of action. We live in interdependent and mutually influencing relationships with and in physical contexts (de Grazia et al., 1996; Ingold, 2000; Latour, 2004; Sontag & Bubolz, 1988). Over time, we become attached to physical things. Connected. Woven together. A very high level of interdependence may well be a type of "integration" (Gwen), a concept that I draw from my data. Integration appears to be a process in which a person and an object become so interdependent with the meaning that they produce, the person-object-meaning becomes as one. This is reflected in participants' statements that these few special things are their lives. Having had a special thing stolen,

Muriel felt: "I lost a piece of myself at that time". Even as participants spoke to the importance of the intangible in life, they also demonstrated that a few special things gave a tangible existence to their lives.

A human ecological perspective frames this dissertation. I am studying older adults as they live in relationship with various contexts (Sontag & Bubolz, 1988; Westney, Brabble, & Edwards, 1988). Human ecological thinking is transdisciplinary. I draw on human ecology, gerontology, and material culture studies, which in turn draw upon other disciplines. "Trans" suggests a synthesizing of theoretical assumptions from more than one discipline at a time (Young, 1991). Accordingly, I am comfortable with the ideas of multiplicity, juxtaposition, and ambivalence, both in terms of theory and empirical findings and in terms of person-environment relations. Even as society has compartmentalized our world into distinct subjects and objects, 'us' and the 'other', and 'here' and 'there', phenomena are more complex than that. Often this complexity is characterized by interdependence. I consider how participants make sense of their selves and their aging through material integration even as they age in a society that disregards the influence of things. I seek to understand, what I term, materialist ambivalence in larger contexts of time and society.

This dissertation is a starting point for the innovative application of theoretical perspectives. On the one hand, I am studying aging well through a materialist lens. By looking for and 'seeing' the materiality of things in older adults' lives, we can gain enhanced insight into later-life identity

construction. I have considered how the materialist ambivalence in the data may be a reflection of older adulthood; of societal norms that people should be concerned only with the intangible; and of socialization of twentieth-century women as kinkeepers who should value family and friends, over material things. On the other hand, I suggest the potential for studying materiality from an aging-well perspective. I seek to build awareness of later life in materialist theorizing. How might material integration vary across later life from young retirees through centenarians? How might integration vary according to birth cohort, as individuals age in ways that are specific to historical periods? How might integration vary according to social constructions of age and gender from one historical period to the next? This work is exploratory and has the potential to contribute not only to aging-well research, but also to materialist theorizing.

Further, new insight may be within reach for another area of research: environmental gerontology. It is described as "the description, explanation, and modification or optimization of the relation between the elderly person and his or her environment" (Wahl & Weisman, 2003, p. 616). From what has been termed a "plateau in theory development" (Lawton, 1998, p. 2), researchers are seeking to build on environmental gerontology's theoretical origins in psychology and geography (Wahl & Weisman, 2003). In the past, research has been focused on older adults' mastery of their environments, with a particular emphasis on physical but also social contexts (e.g., Lawton, 1990; Paton & Cram, 1992). Researchers

have studied how older adults function in physical spaces, particularly in terms of the stresses imposed by those spaces and the abilities of individuals to respond (Lawton, 1982; Lawton & Nahemow, 1973). In recent years, this focus has expanded to include an exploration of individuals' agency in their management of these spaces (Lawton, 1990, 1998).

This interest in agency offers a point of intersection with materialist theorizing. Materialist theorists argue that agency is not owned by animate beings alone; agency is a part of a person-object relationship (Graves-Brown, 2000; Knappett, 2002). Since humans are physical beings interdependent with physical things, action in a physical environment is dependent on both person and object (Ingold, 2000). We must look for the particularities of physical contexts and what they afford (Brown, 2004; Gibson, 1979, pp. 138-139; Graves-Brown, 2000; Miller, 1998). A materialist lens offers a way forward for studying older adults' tangible relationships with place and space. Place is a space to which particular meaning has been attached (Rubinstein & Parmelee, 1992); the scale of place may vary from cherished object to extensive landscape (Low & Altman, 1992). With an eye to what physical contexts enable older adults to do, materialist theory could offer a way to 'see' the materiality in subjects of interest such as: attachment-to-place (Chaudhury, 1999; Howell, 1983; Rowles, 1983; Rowles & Ravdal, 2002), community supportiveness (Keating, Keefe, & Dobbs, 2001), and meaningful connections with living environments (Peace, Holland, & Kelleher, 2003). Such research could

draw upon recent work in material culture studies in terms of migration, biography, and bodily experience (Bender, 2001; Bender, 2002; Tilley, 1994, pp. 7-34).

Upon reflection, I am realizing that this dissertation is a crossroad from which a new program of research will be launched. Weaving together a materialist lens, an aging-well perspective, and building on environmental gerontology, an exciting way forward is presenting itself. On the one hand, materialist theorizing directs us to look to the physicality of our worlds to understand the high degree to which people, things, and meaning may be integrated. The way that identity is constructed is as much about the material as it is about the humans. How does a family quilt, like Irene's mother's quilts, enable an older woman to construct a sense of her self and of her aging? What does the quilt look like? What is the name of the quilt pattern? Who made the quilt? When? Where? Is it worn, from use? Has it been mended? Where? How? By whom? What have the quilt and the woman been able to do together, over time? Might that quilt be a material landscape of sorts?

On the other hand, this person-object-meaning integration will be influenced by that person's location in her life course. Is she at mid-life, in her early 70s, or in her 90s? Does she feel as though she is attached to a certain place? Where and what is 'home'? In other words, is she working through retirement age from a home office, planning to retire to a rural hometown, or has she moved to 'town' from the family farm as a widow?

Where are members of her family and friend support network located? What historical period and society serve as context?

Knowing answers to both of these sets of questions will result in greater understanding than if only one perspective predominated in a study. A materialist lens directs us to see the physicality of a person-object relationship. An aging-well perspective directs us to see beyond the stereotype of 'old person' to understand her identity construction with depth. In response to a recent call in environmental gerontology for "ongoing theoretical synthesis and reflection" (Kendig, 2003, p. 612), a materialist lens offers a way to broaden this area's theoretical horizons. Conceivably, environmental gerontology could serve as an area of research encompassing and responding to both perspectives. Perhaps, a re-labelling as materialist gerontology is worth considering.

Embracing materiality means acknowledging that we are physical beings living in physical context. It means understanding our meaningful integration with things. In this dissertation, I have considered how individuals, amid the changes that characterize later life, make sense of self and of aging through relationships with special things. From a materialist perspective, aging well is, for some people in Western society in 2005, an open-ended process of material integration with special things.

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Paper One – Theorizing About Aging Well: Constructing a Narrative[2]

Aging well is new, again. The past decade has seen a great deal of research energy focused on the nature of aging well (see, for example, whole and part issues of journals dedicated to the subject: *Journal of Social Issues*, Winter 2002; *Clinics in Geriatric Medicine*, August 2002; *The Gerontologist*, October 2001). Yet, societal concern about aging well has been a subject of interest for some time (Strong-Boag, 1988, pp. 180-181). Indeed, theorizing about the nature of aging well has been part of gerontological discourse for more than fifty years (Havighurst, 1961; Hendricks & Achenbaum, 1999; Lawton, 1946). Given this long history, it is perhaps not surprising that we enter the twenty-first century with a large body of literature with often contradictory ideas about this phenomenon – that aging well is about the graceful withdrawal from society; having the good fortune to have resources to remain engaged; making personal meaning of later life, and so on. The purpose of this paper is to address this apparent conceptual disparity by constructing a narrative of aging-well theorizing to make sense of the past in order to provide a point of reference for future work.

Some would argue that aging well is an offensive concept because it suggests that some individuals age poorly, as though aging could be a personal failure (Hepworth, 1995; Holstein, 2000; Katz, 2000; Scheidt & Humpherys, 1999). Such an objection comes from those who believe that if

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[2] A version of this paper has been accepted for publication:
Chapman, S. A. (in press). Theorizing about aging well: Constructing a narrative. *Canadian Journal on Aging*, (Spring).

aging well is the possession of resources for behaving in particular ways, those who lack these resources or the opportunities to acquire them may be marginalized by the use of this concept (Biggs, 2001; Holstein, 2000). However, it also has been argued that the concept is useful because it moves gerontology away from a focus on dependency, frailty, and general misery and suggests positive, resourceful images of later life with an emphasis on older adults' assets and abilities (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Tornstam, 1992). The many terms used in the literature reflect various conceptual approaches used in understanding these assets: successful aging, healthy aging, active aging, productive aging, and optimal aging. Still, it must be recognized that uncritical use of these positive aging terms can obscure the legitimacy of other ways of aging (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003; Hepworth, 1995; Holstein, 2000). That such a debate and various constructions of aging well exist is understandable, considering that frameworks are products of their time and of their theorists who are situated within their own lives, careers, and societies (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Tosh, 2000).

Stepping into the debate, this paper suggests that aging well is a concept worth clarifying for three reasons. First, by turning attention to individuals' assets rather than exclusively focusing on deficits, the concept has the potential to reject the assumption that aging is a personal and societal problem (Hepworth, 1995). Second, the use of the concept has been prescriptive. Rather than simply describing *how* individuals age, much work has been focused on how individuals *should* age (Hepworth, 1995; Holstein,

2000; Katz, 2000). While the prescriptive use of the concept can be marginalizing, if it is clarified, aging well can be a term that is inclusive and descriptive. Third, past theorizing about aging well may no longer resonate with current and upcoming cohorts of older adults. The ways that individuals make sense of later life are many (Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, & Robinson, 1999; Katz, 2000). For this reason, too, the meaning of the concept deserves to be revisited. The argument of this paper is that the concept of aging well has merit for encompassing how, in diverse ways, individuals make sense of changing levels of resources and engagement amid the life-course transitions and events that characterize later life.

This paper constructs a narrative of aging-well theorizing. Turning to the past provides opportunities to consider what we previously have believed and to examine what we have come to take for granted in our interpretations of a phenomenon (Kenyon, Ruth, & Mader, 1999; Smith, 1991; Tosh, 2000). A narrative creates "a context by connecting what seems unrelated into a story" (Berkhofer Jr., 1995, p. 37). Whether a narrative is that of an individual's life course or of a broader societal story through time, the construction of a narrative is a way of knowing or understanding (Polkinghorne, 1996). The process of construction is an opportunity to reflect on past and current thought. In the narrative constructed in this paper, self or identity is a key construct. As will be demonstrated, some theorists have framed aging well as an ideal mix of personal resources and types of engagement evident in the achievement of self-integration. This

integrated self has been taken for granted as an aging-well end-state. However, other theorists have begun to describe aging well as an open-ended process evident in individuals' ongoing negotiation of multiple selves amid changing levels of resources and engagement and amid the life-course transitions and events that characterize later life.

This narrative of aging-well theorizing is presented in three parts. The crafting of the narrative begins with a consideration of past aging-well theorizing and how the pursuit of self-integration has been an underlying point of reference. Then, attention is turned to the manner in which research based on a negotiated-selves perspective is emerging. From this perspective, aging well is being described as a process in which individuals in context make positive meaning through an ongoing, open-ended negotiation of multiple selves amid later-life change. The paper ends with a discussion of the implications of this shift in theorizing for future research.

Narrative Part One: In Pursuit of Self-Integration

Gerontological theorizing has been characterized by a belief that the ideal self is an integrated self, a developmental end-state characterized by personal coherence and centredness. Such self-integration is evident in Erikson's (1963, pp. 268-274) development model, which is informed by the following assumption:

> The word *I*, then, in all languages, is the verbal assurance that each of us is a center of awareness in the center of the universe, and this with the sense of a coherent and

> continuous identity; in other words, we are alive and aware of it....
>
> continuous rather than scattered
>
> indivisible rather than divided
>
> inclusive rather than isolated and excluded
>
> safely bounded rather than invaded or evading
>
> chosen rather than bypassed
>
> etc. (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986, p. 52)

The frequency with which Erikson's (1963) model is cited in aging studies (e.g., Kuhl & Westwood, 2001; McAdams, 1996; Wong, 2000) is a hint of the reliance of gerontological thought on this developmental perspective. However, a concern with an integrated self is not specific to that perspective; a coherence of self also informs the interactionist tradition. For example, although Mead (1934, p. 142) suggested that individuals have multiple selves, as many selves as social relationships, he also argued that they come together as "the complete, unitary self" (p. 144), in the entirety of individuals' social interactions. A self-concept develops until it becomes stable, not unlike the description by Erikson et al. (1986, p. 52) of indivisibility and safe boundedness. According to Mead (1934, p. 143), individuals seek to protect the self-concept from forces that would destabilize it. Seemingly, despite Erikson's and Mead's dramatically different perspectives, an underlying assumption of self-integration is common to both. Just as these perspectives have influenced gerontology in

general, so too, as it will be argued in this paper, has this key assumption informed theorizing about aging well.

Six frameworks are discussed that often are presented as aging-well conceptualizations in gerontological discourse (e.g., in Martin, 2002; McPherson, 1998, pp. 78-81, 158; Nussbaum, Pecchioni, Robinson, & Thompson, 2000, pp. 7-16). The frameworks are Activity Theory (Havighurst, 1961), Disengagement Theory (Cumming & Henry, 1961), Socio-Environmental Theory (Gubrium, 1973), Continuity Theory (Atchley, 1971, 1989), the Selective Optimization with Compensation Model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990), and the Successful Aging Model (Rowe & Kahn, 1997). This group is not inclusive of past theorizing about aging well. Nonetheless, these frameworks represent oft-cited work, with sets of assumptions about the nature of aging well. This paper presents a narrative rather than a comprehensive review of theories. Thus, the nature and chronological path of theorizing are considered, the frameworks are considered relative to each other and in the broader context of society, and the key assumption of self-integration is highlighted.

In the 1940s and 1950s in the emerging field of social gerontology, the place of older adults in society was a concern, as retirement was becoming institutionalized as an expected life phase (Blaikie, 1999, p. 59; Cavan, Burgess, Havighurst, & Goldhamer, 1949, p. 31). Theorists were concerned with how aging happened and what was to be done with older adults who were living long enough to retire (Parsons, 1960). A theory of

the aging process was developing, but it was only explicitly labelled Activity Theory after Disengagement Theory was proposed during the Kansas City Studies of Aging (Gubrium, 1973, p.17; Havighurst, 1961; Marshall, 1999). Since this early phase, the idea of aging well has been debated. Even within the Kansas City program of research, theoretical differences were clear (Marshall, 1999). Yet, both Activity Theory and Disengagement Theory were based on an underlying assumption that self-integration was required to age well.

Activity Theory

Advocates of Activity Theory equated retirement with involuntary withdrawal from society and directed retirees, assumed to be men, to substitute other roles for paid work roles, to remain effective and integrated in society (Havighurst, Neugarten, & Tobin, 1964; Lawton, 1943). To age well was to retain and adapt activities from highly engaged mid-life years in order to remain socially engaged (Cavan et al., 1949, pp. 11, 16; Havighurst, 1961). The higher the level of activity maintained by older adults, the more positive would be the mood and general level of personal adjustment (Cavan et al., 1949, pp. 75-90; Havighurst et al., 1964). It is clear from contemporary writing that concern lay not only with individuals but also with society. Cavan et al. (1949) noted that an individual was expected to respond "to a new situation in such a way as to integrate the expression of his [*sic*] aspirations with the expectations and demands of society" (p. 11). Yet, even as retirees were conceptualized as "active

participants in a democracy" (Lawton, 1946, p. viii) fulfilling the interests of society (McMullin & Marshall, 1999), Activity Theory presented individuals who were aging well as "well-integrated personalities" (Havighurst et al., 1964, p. 424). In other words, to age well was to integrate not only one's self relative to past and present roles but also one's self with societal norms, as a vital but stable contributor to society.

Disengagement Theory

According to Disengagement Theory, aging well was the mutual withdrawal of society and individuals: "The very old person, if he [*sic*] can still perform some tasks, is rewarded, but primarily he is expected to *be* rather than to *do*, to maintain his equilibrium, to symbolize the past rather than to change and learn and create a new history" (Cumming & Henry, 1961, pp. 222-223). This meant that for individuals to age well they should cease to be involved in productive activity or extensive social interaction. Indeed, withdrawal was understood as universal and the path to high morale (Cumming & Henry, 1961, pp. 211-218). Rather than being public contributors, individuals who were aging well were thought to restrict their social interaction to immediate friends and family and the private sphere. To maintain sufficient individual resources was to be able to afford withdrawal that, in turn, helped fulfill a role in the survival of society. Yet, as with Activity Theory, the Disengagement theorists argued that individuals who aged well became "more intensely individual" (Cumming & Henry, 1961, p. 96), or self-centred. This suggests that this second

framework also was grounded on an underlying assumption that self-integration had been achieved by those who aged well.

Socio-Environmental Theory

In the 1960s and 1970s, Socio-Environmental theorists responded to the Activity and Disengagement debate by shifting the theoretical focus from framing aging well in relation to the interests of society to conceptualizing individuals as agents. In the present narrative, agency is understood as the "capacity for and exercise of choice" (Marshall, 1999, p. 439). From a concern for older adults' social integration, Rosow (1967, pp. 10, 20, 29-30) argued that as older adults lost previous societal roles, such as paid work careers, they generally increased their interaction in local social contexts. To age well in Socio-Environmental Theory was to have sufficient "activity resources" of health, financial solvency, and social support, to be able to respond to expectations of these social contexts (Gubrium, 1973, pp. 38-39). Similarly, in Lawton and colleagues' conceptualization, "individual competences" included physical, psychological, and cognitive health, and "ego strength" (Lawton, 1982, p. 38; Lawton & Nahemow, 1973).

Local, age-heterogeneous social contexts were perceived as more demanding in terms of societal contributions than age-homogeneous contexts (Gubrium, 1973, pp. 43-44). If individuals did not have sufficient levels of activity resources or competences, a lack of fit with the demands or "environmental press" would result in low morale and maladaptive aging

(Lawton & Nahemow, 1973). Lawton's (1982, 1986, p. 14) term, ego strength, suggests that the ability of individuals to find a best fit was dependent, in part, on a strong sense of self. Their coherence of self informed their agency enabling them to choose to comply with societal norms, ignore them, or move across social contexts to settings in which they were better equipped to cope (Gubrium, 1973, p. 48). The appearance of agency in the aging-well theorizing narrative foreshadows current thinking about ongoing, open-ended negotiation of selves that depends on agency.

Continuity Theory

Whereas Activity and Disengagement theorists argued that their respective types of aging well required aging in balance with society, Continuity theorists in the late 1960s and 1970s assumed that aging well was a personal evolution. They described older adults as aging well by gradually and meaningfully adapting to change according to a consistent sense of self (Atchley, 1971). Here, again, agency makes an appearance in the narrative in the form of individuals deliberately creating "coherent pictures of the past and link[ing] the past to a purposeful, *integrated* present" (Atchley, 1989, p. 187, italics added). The past was conceptualized as a resource, informing and influencing adaptation. Individuals were understood in context, not only being passively influenced by but also actively drawing upon their present goals and societal expectations (Atchley, 1989). Individuals sought levels of engagement in the present and future similar to past patterns, with the aim of protecting and maintaining

self-concept by reinterpreting it over time. At this point in the narrative, the concept of meaning-making also begins to appear, in the sense that individuals are reflecting on who they have been and continue to be. The use of the descriptor, continuity, recalls Erikson et al.'s (1986, p. 52) use of "continuous" to describe ego, a suggestion of the underlying assumption of self-integration in Continuity Theory. In this framework, aging well entailed the pursuit of self-integration but it was achieved through consistency of self rather than through the substitution of activities (Activity Theory), withdrawal (Disengagement Theory), or changing of contexts (Socio-Environmental Theory).

Selective Optimization with Compensation Model

The narrative turns next to the Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) Model. By the 1980s, theorists were building on earlier theorists' recognition of individuals' interdependent relationships with social contexts and on the premise that individuals seek to age in ways consistent with past selves. In the SOC Model, individuals aged well when they strategically accommodated for changing levels of resources by modifying their interactions with their physical and social contexts (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). That individuals were conceptualized as agents is evident in the framework's prescriptive air: individuals were capable of and should manage their changing personal resources amid later-life events and transitions. This management could occur by compensating for such change: "The central task will be to assist individuals in acquiring effective

strategies involving changes in aspirations and the scope of goals" (Baltes & Baltes, 1990, p. 20). For example, aging well was evident in individuals' strategic investment or optimization of socio-emotional resources in some social relationships rather than others (Carstensen, 1991). To have relationships with a wide variety of people was perceived as less functional in later life than it was to maintain intimate interactions with a few key individuals. Through those specific, predictable, and supportive relationships, individuals could better use their resources to maintain self-concept (Carstensen, 1991). In this framework, agency in context was central to achieving and protecting a consistent self over time.

Model of Successful Aging

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Model of Successful Aging by its very title claimed for itself pre-eminence as the way to age well. As has been observed (Gee & Gutman, 2000), Western society had become increasingly concerned about population aging and society's ability to support an assumed dependency among older adults. If individuals could not prevent age-related loss and maintain physical and mental resources, they could not continue to be engaged. If they could not be engaged, presumably they could not age well and were a burden to society. While this framework has been embraced in the popular media, it also has provoked objections to its potentially marginalizing criteria for success (Scheidt & Humpherys, 1999). To age well, individuals were to lead lives that avoided disability and disease, and thereby maintained mental and physical capacities that

facilitated productive and social engagement in society (Rowe & Kahn, 1997). Individuals' agency was framed not only in terms of responsibility to themselves, but also to society. Disengagement was rejected. Active engagement was advocated. Implicitly, this prescriptive framework assumed that individuals should prolong the viability of their resources and engagement to avoid loss of self through pathological aging. This assumption was congruent with the belief that aging well was associated with the pursuit of a centred, cohesive self, yet, as with early theorizing, in the interests of society.

By comparing key conceptual frameworks, the narrative of aging-well theorizing begins to emerge. Researchers sought to determine the "right" mix of resources and engagement as sets of assets with which individuals could age well. Each framework also was a recipe for achieving an integrated self in later life. According to Activity Theory, if individuals did not have the minimum levels of physical and mental resources, then presumably they were not socially active, suffered emotionally, and thus could not achieve self-integration nor fulfill the interests of society. In Disengagement Theory, physical, mental, and socio-economic resources were critical to the choice to withdraw from extensive social engagement and to become more self-centred. In Socio-Environmental Theory, without health, financial solvency, and social support, individuals could not meet social expectations, and thus high levels of morale and personal coherence were out of reach. In Continuity Theory, without the cognitive ability to

reinterpret the past, individuals could not protect self-concept. According to the SOC Model, individuals were encouraged to invest and optimize available mental, physical, and social resources strategically to maintain self-concept. Finally, according to the Successful Aging Model, individuals were expected to assume responsibility for maintaining mental and physical functional capacities toward retaining self and being socially and productively engaged. The thread of maintaining the "right" mix of resources and engagement in the narrative reflects a concern with later-life instrumentality. The underlying assumption of the pursuit of self-integration suggests a concern with bringing individuals' multiple selves under control into a coherent whole.

In addition to the emphasis on various forms of an integrated self, a second thread in the aging-well narrative is evident in this early theorizing. Over time, frameworks became increasingly explicit about the place of individual agency as it informed individuals' management of aging. This evolution mirrors a growing interest in social gerontological theorizing in understanding how older adults perceive and make choices relative to the contexts in which they live (McMullin & Marshall, 1999). This agency continues to have a role in the narrative constructed in this paper. Next, the narrative continues with the explication of the emerging assumption that a key theme in aging well is the active negotiation of multiple selves in an ongoing, open-ended, and meaningful fashion.

Narrative Part Two: Negotiating Multiple Selves

In this second part of the narrative, the paper demonstrates how gerontological theorizing is shifting from a view that aging well is the achievement of self-integration relative to particular sets of resources or forms of engagement. This section begins by discussing how gerontologists are describing aging well as the ongoing co-construction and reconstruction of multiple selves as an open-ended process of meaning-making amid later-life events and transitions.

In recent years, as some researchers have observed, the usefulness of the concept of an integrated self is being questioned, and arguments are being made that individuals have multiple selves that cannot be resolved into a single entity (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 13). Selves have long been understood as day-to-day constructions of self-meaning, through introspective interpretation and social interaction with others (Bruner, 2003; Mead, 1934, p. 142). However, issues of plurality of life-course experiences, contradictory constructions of old age, technological innovations, and changes in the meaning of time and space in society combine to influence individuals' efforts to keep up with these selves as they multi-task and juggle paid and unpaid work (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, pp. 3, 10). Bernard, Chambers, and Granville (2000) observe that such conflicting demands are of special relevance to women: "As women, we are having to deal with a great number of complex and often contradictory messages about who we are, what we should be doing and

how we should be dealing with growing older" (Bernard et al., p. 7). Yet, self remains a vital, contemporary concept, evident in the societal anxiety that surrounds a fear of the loss of self through frailty and dependence (Basting, 2003; Herzog & Markus, 1999; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, pp. 4, 80).

Rather than the concept of self, the pursuit of an integrated self may no longer fit current society. In a longitudinal case analysis, Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, and Robinson (1999) ask, "What happens after the achievement of 'integrity'?" (p. 827). They find that Erikson's (1963) developmental stages may describe some individuals' experiences but that other individuals live long enough to look beyond the achievement of ego integrity; and, still others may not perceive life as a coherent, integrated story (Coleman et al., 1993, 1999). Not all individuals feel the need to achieve wisdom or to resolve life stories by seeking or granting forgiveness (Black, 2003; Woodward, 2003). Black (2003) observes, "There is no one way for elders to forgive, just as there is no way [*sic*] one way for old people to live or to age" (p. 35). Some would go so far as to say that to associate resolution or detached wisdom with later life may be considered ageist and limiting (Woodward, 2003).

A contemporary theme in this aging-well narrative is that older adults may frame their life meaning as a story. Rather than assuming a clear plot, though, this conceptualization of story is an open-ended process in which goals are continuing to be set amid later-life changes (Coleman et al.,

1999). Bruner (2003) writes, "Self-making through self-narrating is restless and endless" (p. 221). This process, too, is inherently social as negotiation occurs not only with one's selves but also with other people (Bruner, 2003). The social elements of negotiating selves are perhaps apparent in a particular way in later life, considering that the majority of older adults are women. It has been suggested that "life assumes its richest moments in relationships, and women, the dominant group among the old, do not easily conform to the social contract myth, that the individual is essentially solitary, bound to others only through self-interested free choice" (Fahey & Holstein, 1993, p. 249). Rather than an introspective pursuit of self-integration, aging well may be an open-ended negotiation of the co-construction of multiple selves.

A key dimension of this theorizing narrative is a life-course perspective (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). Aging well may entail making meaning over time about past, present, and future selves (Kitwood, 1997, p. 135; Sabat & Harré, 1992). The manner in which individuals negotiate their selves is influenced by major events and transitions like retirement, widowhood, downsizing, and/or increasing frailty. Even though individuals may no longer be involved in some previous roles like paid worker, the selves associated with those roles may remain meaningful as they are reconstructed or modified (Kitwood, 1997, pp. 80, 136; Sabat & Harré, 1992). Individuals actively negotiate their various identities as they deal with day-to-day issues, one context and one relationship at a time, yet amid

multiple contexts and dimensions of time (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, pp. 95, 224).

A second theme in this theorizing narrative is that individuals' ongoing negotiation of selves occurs amid diminishing levels of resources. Research on personhood and dementia illustrates this view. The sharing of a story by an individual with dementia may appear incoherent from a self-integration perspective. However, researchers are demonstrating that "despite verbal communicative deficits and cognitive impairments, older people with dementia use and interpret nonverbal behaviour in their determination, and struggle to remain part of the communicative world" (Hubbard, Cook, Tester, & Downs, 2002, p. 163). If listeners actively engage the various fragmented threads of the story, and recognize the storyteller as a person with values, preferences, and needs, then the storyteller and listener construct or modify an overall narrative and thus selves, specific to the experiences related (Kitwood, 1997, pp. 8, 136; Sabat & Harré, 1992). Though speaking in fragments or gestures, such storytellers are "expressing selfhood" (Basting, 2003, p. 97). They continue to create personal meaning, positioning themselves with their listeners and may make positive meaning of negative life experiences (Hubbard et al., 2002; Sabat & Harré, 1992; Usita, Hyman, & Herman, 1998). If aging well is conceptualized as ongoing and open-ended rather than as an integrated end-state, individuals with dementia may be aging well moment-to-moment because they continue to co-construct multiple selves in meaningful ways.

Still, it must be recognized that, at other times, individuals may not be able to make positive meaning amid later-life changes and thus, are not aging well. Yet, "A frail person may not *have* health, family, money, or cognitive competence. Nevertheless, that person may *be* in the sense of hopefulness, coping, acceptance, and transcendence" (Kenyon, 1991, p. 31). Aging well may be about the meaningful negotiation of selfhood, rather than particular levels of resources that allow for an ideal type of societal engagement.

Aging well is a complex, dynamic process. As resources, engagement, and contexts change over time, when individuals make personal sense of multiply located selves and are comfortable with their plurality rather than seeking to centralize and synchronize them, such individuals would appear to be aging well. Such personal meaning is illustrated by contentment (Fisher, 1992; Nilsson, Ekman, & Sarvimäki, 1998; Wenger, 1997). It is evident in the achievement of a best fit between personal needs, values, and preferences, and experiences in various contexts (Eales, Keating, & Damsma, 2001). Individuals who are aging well manage to find a fit between their resources and societal demands in ways that result in new meaning about some part of their selves (Dittmann-Kohli, 1990; Wong, 2000). Aging well, then, is an ability to live with the juxtaposition of one self to another, without need to achieve closure, completion, or integration, but assuming open-endedness in the ongoing co-construction of selves (Bruner, 2003; Coleman et al., 1999; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 215).

Continuing the Narrative

This paper is a moment in an ongoing narrative. From the construction of this narrative, it is clear that past theorizing has been grounded in an implicit belief that to age well was to achieve self-integration in relation to particular sets of resources or forms of engagement. Yet, over time, theorists increasingly have focused on individuals' agency in dealing with changes in those resources and engagement. The narrative shows that theorists are turning their interest to older adults' making sense of these changes through their ongoing, open-ended negotiation of selves in later life.

What lies ahead? It may be that the next chapter in the narrative of aging-well theorizing will lie in further understanding the place of meaning-making in and about the negotiation of selves (Berman, 2000; Dittmann-Kohli, 1990; Ovrebo & Minkler, 1993; Wong, 1989, 2000). One example of movement in this direction is work by Harper (1997). Her feminist perspective places the theoretical lens on gender and past concern with retaining later-life instrumentality through the control of the body. She argues that past attention to personal resources, later-life independence, and productivity was situated within a field dominated by men in the mid-twentieth century seeking to master and reduce the effects of aging on (men's) bodies. A new direction for the narrative may be to understand the shift in theorizing in terms of a gendered recognition of the role of meaning-making in aging well. Considering that social constructions of gender

influence how individuals construct their selves (Cross & Madson, 1997), a second worthy direction for the narrative is the consideration that aging-well experiences may, themselves, be gendered. Researchers might turn to study how older adults make meaning of, for example, their changing instrumentality, and how that differs by gender.

The tracing of an aging-well theorizing narrative is useful because it prompts re-evaluation and the recognition of the situatedness of theory over time. From a story line about self-integration as an end-state, to one about an open-ended negotiation of selves amid change, to one that may emerge about teasing apart the nature of the meaning made of this negotiation, this narrative construction creates an opportunity to look back and observe these shifts. This narrative is and will continue to be a product of historical time, societal dynamics, and theorists' positions in those contexts.

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Paper Two – A 'Materialist' Lens on Aging Well: Special Things in Later Life[3]

"This house. It has a lot of stories [laughing]."

-Hannah

This is Hannah. This is a house. We shall call it House. Hannah is the person who, with her family and friends, built House; it is one of Hannah's special things. House has stories. They are Hannah's stories, too. Hannah and House have constructed these stories over 60 years. This paper considers how studying relationships, like the one that Hannah and House have built, can inform aging-well research.

Aging well is a multi-faceted and, at times, contentious concept which gerontologists have studied for over fifty years (Havighurst, 1961; Hendricks & Achenbaum, 1999; Lawton, 1946). With the aging of the Baby Boomers, aging well is receiving renewed interest in Western society. On the one hand, use of the concept has been criticized for an exclusive focus on prescriptive standards requiring certain levels of resources and of activity (Biggs, 2001; Holstein, 2000). Presumably, if individuals do not meet these standards, aging well is not possible. However, recent research has sought to conceptualize additional, diverse ways to age well. This broader, more inclusive approach is evident in researchers' interests in how individuals find a fit between their resources and societal demands in ways

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that make sense to themselves (Chapman, in press; Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, & Robinson, 1999; Dittmann-Kohli, 1990; Phelan, Anderson, LaCroix, & Larson, 2004; Westerhof, Dittmann-Kohli, & Bode, 2003; Wong, 2000). In line with this interest is the study of how older adults construct a sense of self amid the events and transitions of later life.

One way to study this identity construction is to focus on social interaction. When people interact, they exchange information about each other and create new information or meaning about their selves (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993; Mead, 1934, p. 140; Westerhof et al., 2003). A second way is to focus on relationships with special things. The special things that many people in Western society keep through the course of their lives are things that really matter. They are particular pieces of physical matter that make a difference in our lives. They are material, which we may notice if we bump into them or when they are absent. They may enable us to take action; they may remind us of other people. We might feel a loss of self if we are forced to give them away or if they are taken from us. We are in relationship with special things, in some cases for a long time.

Over the last two decades, gerontologists, sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists have contributed to a special or cherished objects literature (e.g., Belk, 1992; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Hecht, 2001; Marcoux, 2001a; McCracken, 1987; Price, Arnould, & Curasi, 2000; Rubinstein, 2002; Sherman & Newman, 1977-78; Tobin, 1996; Wapner, Demick, & Redondo, 1990). Older adults

and their cherished possessions have been studied for how individuals assign meaning to these things and how, as a result, the possessions provide a sense of comfort and continuity, and sometimes, a sense of burden (Curasi, 1999; Lustbader, 1996; McCracken, 1987, 1988; Unruh, 1983). Increasingly, as with the shift in aging-well research, interest has turned to how older adults construct identity relative to change (Marcoux, 2001a; Rowles & Ravdal, 2002; Rubinstein & Parmelee, 1992), such as during the dispersal of things in downsizing a home.

Much of the emphasis of the cherished objects literature has been on humans' influence on special things, as part of older adults' control of their physical environments (e.g., Lawton, 1990; Paton & Cram, 1992). However, researchers across diverse disciplines including material culture studies, sociology, history, and anthropology are re-examining the presumed dominance of object by subject. Not only do subjects influence objects, but objects also influence subjects (de Grazia, Quilligan, & Stallybrass, 1996). Rather than assuming, as has been done since the early Enlightenment in the 1600s (de Grazia et al., 1996) that "subject" and "object" are distinct, theorists have begun to explore how subject and object co-construct each other (Brown, 2004, p. 4). To understand either of them, we must study them in relationship. To study such relations, we need to dedicate more attention than in the past to the materiality of objects (Brown, 2004; Graves-Brown, 2000; Ingold, 2000; Miller, 1998).

In aging-well research, we need a theoretical framework to consider how the physicality of special things contributes to later-life identity construction. In response to this need, I introduce a materialist lens, which is a theoretical perspective that directs researchers to 'see' the physical matter with which human beings live. In this paper, I distil three key assumptions from materialist theorizing across various disciplines. Each assumption is illustrated with data from a recent series of in-depth interviews with older women. In the last section of the paper, I demonstrate how these assumptions may be applied to aging-well research. In sum, this paper considers how a materialist lens can enhance understanding of identity construction, and more broadly, aging well, in terms of later-life relationships with special things.

Materialist Lens Assumptions:

Assumption #1: Interdependence of Subject and Object

> I thought you'd want to start from day one and I'd tell my whole life story. And, how I get along because I'm an old woman. I'm 91, you know. Or almost 91, 90 past. Living in my own home, I thought you'd want to know how I get the cleaning done, how I get this done, but you don't give a darn! [laughing]

In recent interviews with Hannah[4], an older woman living in western Canada, my research objective was to ask about her special things. She

[4] To ensure privacy, I assigned pseudonyms to all interviewees and individuals that they named.

assumed that I wished to learn how she has managed to live to 90 years of age, in her own home. Indeed, my overarching interest is aging well. Yet, rather than asking her directly about how she is aging, my use of a materialist lens guided me to approach her from a different angle, from that of her special things. That she defines herself in part as someone "living in my own home" underscores how she understands herself through one of her special things, House. This is an example of how employing a materialist lens directs attention not only to Hannah but also to a physical object with which she has a relationship. By seeing this person-object relation, we can gain enhanced insight into the meaning being made around self and aging.

From a materialist perspective, humans and physical matter are only significant in relationship with each other (de Grazia et al., 1996; Latour, 2004; Morley, 2001; Williams & Costall, 2000). They are interdependent. Trying to distinguish them is not useful because one lacks meaning without the other (Brown, 2004; Graves-Brown, 2000; Ingold, 2000): "Consider things, and you will have humans. Consider humans, and you are by that very act interested in things" (Latour, 2000, p. 20). To ask Hannah about being 90 years of age and living in the community without asking her about where she lives would provide only part of her aging-well story. By asking Hannah about her special things, I am asking her about her self, her sense of identity. Individuals make sense of who they are, not only relative to people, but also relative to physical matter (Bender, 2002). A materialist

lens highlights how we exist interdependently with and in, not external to, our physical contexts (Ingold, 2000).

Hannah with her husband and their children needed a home. At the height of the Second World War, vacant apartments and houses were hard to find in their city. They felt forced to borrow money to buy land. They started a cycle of payments. Hannah, her husband, her family, and friends dug a basement and hammered boards. They moved into House in winter when it was barely more than a skeleton of uprights, beams, and a roof.

> In the winter, yeah, two by four's. And of course we had no gas. It was cold.... We borrowed from the Household Finance, which was really high, high interest.... Every day was, you pulled out your list,... "We can't pay all of this here, but we'll pay a little here and we'll pay what's a little more, and just, wankle the money around."... And that's how we built our home. Little by little by little.

In the early years, Hannah regularly made baking powder biscuits for days when she and her husband had saved enough money to buy a few boards to add to the house walls. As family and friends arrived for a biscuit lunch, she would say, "Well, we can't have lunch until you put on some of the pieces of Donnacona board[5]." Together, they built House. Over time, they finished the structure, plastered and painted the inside, and tarpapered and stuccoed the outside.

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[5] Donnacona [unconfirmed spelling]: a brand name in western Canada in the mid-1940s.

Hannah lives not only in the 1940s' style house that she and her husband built, but also *with* that house as it ages and as her neighbourhood and broader world continue to change. Hannah and House appear to live in an interdependent, mutually beneficial relationship. Much as people construct meaning through their social interaction, humans and physical matter also engage in "mutual constitution" (Brown, 2004, p. 5). Rubinstein & Parmelee (1992) hint at this interdependence: "*Embodiment* reflects the most profound sort of environmental representation of the life course in which, subjectively, the boundaries between self and object are blurred" (p. 152). That blurring is based in part on humans and in part on the nature and shape of physical matter and what that matter can "afford" (Gibson, 1979, pp. 138-139). The relationship is mutually involving (Ingold, 2000).

Gibson (1979) introduced the concept, affordance, to describe how physical items lend themselves to certain kinds of interaction with humans. The type of interaction depends on the item, its nature, shape, quality, and so on. Gibson (1979) noted, "An affordance is not bestowed upon an object by a need of an observer and his [*sic*] act of perceiving it. The object offers what it does because it is what it is" (p. 139). Physical items may be raw material or processed and accordingly enable various kinds of interactions. For example, the material of a tree lends itself to being manufactured into planks. How the manufacturing occurs is a reflection of a particular socio-cultural group of humans. Processed wood lends itself to being used in

certain ways. If wood is fashioned into a chair, that chair lends itself to having a person sit on it, in socio-cultural settings in which chairs are meaningful items (Graves-Brown, 2000). The specifics of the physical become critical for what uses the physical lends itself in relationship with humans (Gibson, 1979; Graves-Brown, 2000; Ingold, 2000; Miller, 1998).

Materialist theorists are studying how individuals' lives are intimately interdependent with physical items (Bender, 2002; Ingold, 2000; Latour, 2000; Williams & Costall, 2000). Hannah and other people are interacting in and with the physicality of House. House plays an active role in day-to-day life, sheltering those who visit Hannah but also reflecting whom Hannah is, by its warmth, tidiness, fresh paint, décor, and keepsakes.

Assumption #2: To Study Meaning-Making, We Must Study the Subject-Object Relationship

Given that we assume that subject and object are interdependent, the second key assumption of a materialist lens is that we must study the subject and object in interaction to understand either one. With so much concern about subjects, we often lose sight of objects, the tangible matter in and with which people live.

Hannah has lived with House for 60 years. Hannah's husband has passed away and family and friends live near and far. In hindsight, Hannah is glad that she and her husband had to buy the land to build House. It continues to serve as a key source of financial security to Hannah, to

provide her with shelter, to give her privacy, to welcome guests, and to let her continue to be herself.

> Well, it's home. You can bring people in, you can have company, you know. Although I don't have a great deal anymore, because for the reason at my age, I'm not able to do the washing.... But, ah, but it's security. I know, as long as God gives me the health, that I have a place to stay.... Well, yeah, I love my home. Well, wouldn't you, if you worked from scratch for it, you know? Just like making a cake. If you make a cake and it's a flop, then it's a flop. But, if it's a good one, you're proud of it! Sure.

For the purposes of this paper, I have named Hannah's house, House. I name it to demonstrate that House is not 'simply' physical matter. Nor is it 'only' a conventional object known as a house. House is a set of relations between Hannah; her family; the material that has been configured in a certain way at a certain location and moment in history; and the meaning arising from this interaction. Each part of this relationship, including the physical, has played a role that specifies this house as House.

House is more than matter "out there" (Latour, 2004, p. 158) existing in a void. Physical items occur naturally or are fashioned by humans. Over time, members of a society come to develop a shared understanding of how that form of material is known and labelled (Graves-

Brown, 2000; McCracken, 1986; Miller, 1987). As a result, an object is a socially constructed understanding of a familiar piece of material within a given socio-cultural context at a certain point in history. For example, in 2004 in Western society, we share an understanding of what a house is; we "code" (Brown, 2004, p. 4) arrangements of materials that have four walls with a roof and multiple living spaces as houses. Having coded something as an object, we share that meaning across society and tend not to think about the object much further. We use the object to accomplish tasks and we cease to think about its materiality; we take it for granted (Brown, 2004; Graves-Brown, 2000; Tiffany, 2004).

In Latour's (2004) terms, House is a "thing". Things are specific assemblies of people, physical matter, and meaning. In other words, a thing is "a particular subject-object relation" (Brown, 2004, p. 4), such that the animate and inanimate players co-construct each other in ways that distinguish one item from other items. Consider the "thingness of objects" (Brown, 2004, p. 4), and this distinction becomes clearer. A thing becomes apparent when an object no longer does what we expect it to do, based on our social construction of that object. For example, when a house starts to feel like home, that object has started playing a particular role in a relationship with a particular human. The physical material is affording certain living arrangements for the human; that human is able to do and be in certain ways. Accordingly, the meaning that is produced as a result of this relationship is unique to that relationship. That house is no longer a

conventional object; it has become a thing, a "matter of concern" (Latour, 2004, p. 157). Considering that House is a thing that really matters to Hannah, it is a special thing.

A materialist lens requires that we start to see the things in older adults' lives, and more particularly, how people are not masters of physical contexts imposing meaning; we live *in* and with physical contexts making meaning together (de Grazia et al., 1996; Graves-Brown, 2000; Ingold, 2000; Latour, 2004). When considering older adults and their physical environments, many researchers have tended in the past to subscribe to the conventional understanding of objects without really seeing them: "As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things" (Brown, 2004, p. 4). By bringing the object "into view" (de Grazia et al., 1996, p. 2) relative to the subject, we can begin to access greater depth in understanding the complexity of subject-object relations (Ingold, 2000). We are looking for the things that play a role in how individuals make sense of their day-to-day lives and of their aging. In the past, we might have looked through the house to study Hannah and how much control she had over her physical environment, as an older woman with increasing frailty. Certainly, Hannah remarks on her changed ability to wash House's walls and to do extensive laundry for multiple houseguests. However, a materialist lens guides us to see the house in its entirety, front, sides, and back; to see the back door and

how it guides us into the kitchen; and to see where Hannah has a cozy place by the window. By seeing House, we gain insight into Hannah beyond her management of her physical environment. House is a physical space, without any interior doors, because Hannah does not like to be "closed into small areas". House has been large enough, in the past, and yet it is small enough in the present to afford the lifestyle that Hannah desires.

Depending on the materiality of an item and depending on the human involved, the item may play a role in the making of meaning (Gibson, 1979; Graves-Brown, 2000; Ingold, 2000; Miller, 1998). Meaning is part and product of individuals' interactions with physical items, not simply imposed on that matter (Bender, 2001; Ingold, 2000). What individuals do with items, relative in part to what the items afford, informs individuals about themselves and communicates meaning to other individuals.

A materialist lens helps to bring interrelationships between animate and inanimate parts into focus and to highlight how the parts co-construct meaning. House afforded family living, keeping Hannah, her husband, and their children warm and dry with its sturdy floors, insulated walls, and sheltering roof. House was large enough to shelter not only Hannah and her family, but also extended family when need arose. As a result, many people have lived with House. Indeed, Hannah has maintained House, with the help of a few other people, particularly in recent years. The relationship between Hannah and House produces a sense of home for Hannah, a form

of identity actualized as a material place where people can be themselves (Rubinstein & Parmelee, 1992). House is a meaningful, physical place where she can do as she likes: play her music as loud as she likes, read, bake, or sleep, day or night. 'Home is where the heart is': a place in which to create family identity, to grow up, to live, to grow old.

Identity, one type of meaning, is a vital contemporary concept, evident in anxiety surrounding a fear of the loss of self in later life through frailty and dependence (Basting, 2003; Herzog & Markus, 1999; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, pp. 4, 80). Making sense of growing old amid changes in resource and activity levels may be key to aging well and it is this area of interest to which aging-well researchers are dedicating increasing attention (Berman, 2000; Dittmann-Kohli, 1990; Ovrebo & Minkler, 1993; Wong, 1989, 2000). A materialist focus on animate-inanimate interdependence is one way to study how part of the meaning-making process of aging well is located in relationships with special things.

Hannah makes sense of her aging, and she does this in reference to House as she recounts a recent experience:

> I was having trouble just, you know, getting up, and the lady says something about arthritis, and I says, "It isn't the arthritis, it's my old age that bothers me." She says, "Oh," she says, "what are you, about 75, 76?" I says, "No, I'm 90 years old, past!" She says, "Well, you don't look like you're 90. You don't talk like you're 90." But, I said, "Oh yeah,

I've got my own house. I do my own work, but I can't wash walls,..."

Individuals who are aging well appear to understand that they are aging; they are reconstructing or modifying their identities relative to their aging experiences (Steverink, Westerhof, Bode, & Dittmann-Kohli, 2001; Westerhof et al., 2003). Hannah points out that the ways in which she interacts with House are changing; yet, she still defines herself as an older woman who lives in her own house, in the community. Over time, Hannah's physical resources have changed, and as a result the ease with which she maintains House has diminished. However, she is aging well as she makes personal sense of her aging self in relationship to this change.

Materialists ask questions not about "whether things are but what work they perform" (Brown, 2004, p. 7; Miller, 1998). Through the interdependence of a material item, a person, and the meaning that arises from their relationship, they are co-constructing each other. This interdependence is a profound though fragile relationship (Latour, 2004). If the item is lost, that meaning can only be partially accessed. If the person passes away, part of the meaning is lost with that person. Without the meaning, the item can no longer be a special thing. Things influence how we live our day-to-day lives, influencing what we are able to do and how we make sense of our actions and thoughts. Meaning-making is an ongoing, open-ended process happening through subject-object interdependence (Bruner, 2003; Mead, 1934, p. 142). Particular meaning has been made

through this specific animate-inanimate relationship as well as through social interaction. Hypothetically, if House had been built differently, the ways in which Hannah and her family lived and constructed their idea of home might have been different. The house might not have continued to support Hannah in later life and Hannah might not have wished to stay in it. The house might not have become a special thing. As a result, how Hannah is living her later life would likely have been different. Seeing and studying subject-object relations can provide insight into later-life meaning-making.

Assumption #3: Subject-Object Relations Exist in Larger Contexts

A materialist lens is useful because it encourages researchers not only to see things but also to consider how individuals' interdependence with special things exists in various contexts (Brown, 2004; Carrier, 2003; Graves-Brown, 2000; Latour, 2000, 2004; Morley, 2001; Williams & Costall, 2000). The ways in which individuals make meaning in interaction with things will be influenced by where these subject-object relations occur. For example, they occur in time and in society with various attendant norms including those around gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (Bender, 2001, p. 4). Subject-object relations influence their contexts, too. Meaning arises from subject-object relations' interaction with context.

Of the many possible contexts that may be of interest to gerontologists, a materialist lens emphasizes time. If time were not considered as a context, later life would appear as static pictures rather than a film (Golant, 2003). Aging is a process that happens over time and in time

(Hardy & Waite, 1997; Hendricks, 2001). Individuals age; members of birth cohorts age together; society ages; and the natural and human-built things of our world age. Much as aging happens in time, so, too, does meaning-making: "It is considered an inherently temporal and dynamic process. Persons do not only attribute meaning to the present situation, but they also reflect about their past and future" (Westerhof et al., 2003, p. 128). This temporal context may be conceptualized as historical time; it may be the shared perspective of a generation; and, it may be an individual's developmental or biographical existence. According to research interests, gerontologists may choose to consider additional relevant contexts. For example, things may be studied relative to social relations such as close interpersonal relationships, community ties, cultural contexts, or societal links. Whatever the context, it exists in a larger schema of historical time. Cultures evolve over time; societies are characterized according to specific factors intersecting at particular moments in time. As a result, physical items become conventional objects as part of specific cultures and larger societies with their attendant norms and values. At any one time, an object may or may not be perceived as a special thing.

The relationship between Hannah and House developed through the twentieth-century in Western society. Hannah lived most of her life in that century. She is a member of the 1914 birth cohort, becoming an adult during the Great Depression in the 1930s and learning to "make do" (Strong-Boag, 1986, p. 42) with a meagre income during those lean years

and into the Second World War. In keeping with contemporary norms for women, she has lived as a kinkeeper and manager of her family's domestic sphere (Rosenthal, 1985). She also did paid work for almost twenty years of her married life. Her social context has comprised husband, children, extended family, friends, neighbours, fellow churchgoers, workmates, and local citizens.

In turn, House is a relatively small, two-story frame structure that has supported Western lifestyle habits. House was built as resources allowed. In other words, that which makes House a thing is, in part, a reflection of the time and society in which House was built and the individuals that built House. Hannah's birth cohort is characterized as one of young adults with few financial resources in the 1930s. Her reference to wartime rationing illustrates this:

> We had to build the house, during the war, because we had a verbal agreement that we would move, when they [landlords] came back from the war.... And, ah, lots of times, we didn't have much to eat. But, we still survived. And, I used to go to the rummage sale.... I used to go down to buy old pants and old shirts, make up for my kid.

Understanding House's historical context is important for understanding Hannah and how she is aging. House was difficult to build; it was constructed one board and baking powder biscuit at a time. Were it built after the war or fifty years later, the process of constructing a house and the

materials used would have been different and would have afforded Hannah different opportunities in the creation of home (Brown, 2004). House is a product of a specific moment in Western society.

A materialist lens directs our attention not only to individuals' interdependence with physical matter, but also to the situatedness of person-object relations in larger contexts, particularly in time. Hannah has come to know herself as a survivor throughout her shared time with House. She has scraped resources together as part of a young family and now gets by in later-life widowhood in a changing neighbourhood, city, province, country, and society. Another older adult in other circumstances might make sense of increasing frailty differently from Hannah. A materialist lens directs us to consider that relationships with special things are in interaction with larger contexts such that meaning is made not only between Hannah and House but also with time and other contexts.

Applying a Materialist Lens to Aging-Well Research

In the previous section, I illustrated three key assumptions of a materialist lens by referring to the relationship that Hannah and House have built. In this next section, I demonstrate how a materialist lens might be applied to aging-well research. I acknowledge that this lens may not be useful to all areas of aging-well research; however, I do suggest that it is one way to study later-life identity construction. One application of this lens would be to study how individuals make sense of later-life events and transitions. This lens would direct researchers to look for an older adult's

special things and for their influence in how she makes sense of, for example, becoming a widow. The role of objects in transitions is not a new area of research (Habermas & Paha, 2002; McCracken, 1987; Mehta & Belk, 1991; Parkin, 1999; Silver, 1996; Winnicott, 1958, p. 230). In past work, researchers have focused on individuals and their psychological attachment to special things. However, a materialist lens directs us to look for and see the physicality and influence of the special things in the meaning-making process. As a result, we can gain enhanced insight.

Upon the death of a partner, individuals seek to construct a sense of self as widow or widower (Lopata, 1996, p. 122; Martin Matthews, 1991, pp. 24-28). This identity construction, in part, may be grounded in relationships with things. Based on the first materialist assumption that people and physical matter are interdependent, imposing a conceptual separation between subjects and objects limits our understanding of either one. For Hannah, House is such a thing that can inform our understanding of how she is aging well. For her, negotiating widowhood meant staying with House as a way to continue to construct a sense of the self she had known with her husband. Hannah has observed that, "Lots of times when a woman is widowed, the first thing she does is sell her house and go some place where the memories are not there [*sic*]. With me, I want to stay with the memories." Hannah has had the financial means and health to stay with House. Importantly, she has *wanted* to stay with House.

For a survivor, keeping a late partner's special things is one way to hold onto memories of that person. A thing may be evidence of that late person, as suggested in Ash's (1996) study of memory and widowhood. She observes that a late partner's things may give tangible form to memories. Experiencing the texture and smell of that person's clothes demonstrates how "The garment becomes imbued with the essence of the person..." (Ash, 1996, p. 219). This embodiment demonstrates the late partner's interdependence with the item of clothing. Yet, the thing is not as complete as it was when in living relationship with the late partner (Ash, 1996). As a result, that thing may revert to being a conventional object, for the late partner's specific meaning may be lost. However, if, on the one hand, meaning were made by the couple and the thing, the thing may be so meaningful that wearing the clothing may affirm a survivor's past sense of self; on the other hand, the meaning may be so intense that the survivor cannot deal with the thing and so it is not used. The point is that bringing the object into view gives us an opportunity to understand better the subject's struggle to make sense of the new identity, whether the subject is maintaining an intense interaction with the object, putting it away, or even letting it go. This recalls the second assumption of the materialist lens that we must study special things as subject-object relations to understand the complexity of the meaning-making.

Letting go of special things that once linked partners may be one way to make personal sense of widowhood. Marcoux (2001b) reports from

his research that an older man perceived that the home he shared with his late wife and all of the special things contained therein were so closely attached to her that to move them would be to disturb her; he had to leave it all:

> Everything in that house reminded him of his spouse: how she had imbued her personality into the place, the life she gave to the place, the objects that she had chosen and that became part of the place. Nothing, according to Mr Ricard, was not hers, nothing was not her. He felt that by taking the furniture with him he would have uprooted her; that he could not do.... As he put it, he cut himself from that place. (Marcoux, 2001b, p. 81)

For both Hannah and Mr Ricard, special things were clearly more than conventional objects. His late wife and her special things could not be distinguished. They were interdependent just as Hannah remarks about her special things: "They're my life. They're my life [higher pitch]. Part of what I've done, part of what I've seen." In some instances, some things are regarded as being so special as to be "sanctified" (Unruh, 1983, pp. 347-348). To let a thing go may require a ritual of divestment (McCracken, 1986) so that personal meaning is detached.

Recalling the third materialist assumption that subject-object relations exist in larger contexts, researchers need to consider, for example, the historical period in which later-life relationships with special things are

occurring. Otherwise, we may miss part of the meaning-making that may arise from the mutually influencing relationship between the subject-object relation that is a special thing and the larger context. Hannah, as a widow, deliberately chooses to remain with House because they have become interdependent in the larger context of hard economic times, her own and her family's life courses, and the changing nature of her neighbourhood and city. House had to be built due to contemporary circumstances of the Second World War and the local economy. Through the struggle of paying for House while raising a family, Hannah and her husband were survivors. She continues to survive and as a result, House continues to be maintained and has a presence on her street and in her neighbourhood. If history had been different, Hannah and House and her sense of self and how she is aging would likely be different.

As we study aging well, looking to special things can provide insight into how older adults make sense of such transitions as widowhood. Considering that the likelihood of a widowed person to move residences following widowhood is greatest within the first year of a partner's death (Chevan, 1995), a materialist lens might be useful in studying how a physical home plays a role in the identity shift from partnered person. This lens directs our attention to the object in its interdependence with the subject. How has a house or apartment enabled and/or obstructed a widow or widower? Has it comforted and/or seemed oppressive through its familiarity? Has the need to maintain the physical space been a good

distraction and/or overwhelming? As individuals negotiate their transitions to widowed persons, they do so in the context of physical items and of time and society. Their construction of a changed sense of self and how they are aging occurs in complex interrelationships possibly with special things. Through subject-object relations, we can gain enhanced insight into meaning-making that occurs in such transitions as widowhood toward understanding their varying significance across older adults. Such depth of insight might not be available if only a subject were the focus of study. A materialist lens directs us to take the physicality of special things as a point of reference and appreciate that an apparently minor item may make a significant difference in a transition.

Applying a materialist lens leads to particular kinds of research questions (Brown, 2004) that remind us that older adults are interdependent with physical objects in time. How does a special thing organize an older adult and her social world? House provides a key foundation in Hannah's ongoing identity construction, for example, in her identities as spouse and widow. What work does that thing perform? House literally shelters Hannah as well as giving her space to express herself to herself and to others when they visit. What effect does it have? With House, Hannah continues to make sense of who she has been, is, and may yet become. How does that physical item shape that person? As a 90-year old, Hannah continues to live in the community; she also relies on social and support networks of family and friends. How is that person shaping that material? She, with that social

support, maintains House so that it continues to be a viable place in which to live. How is the thing contributing to identity construction and thereby to aging well? Through her interdependence with House and the opportunities that arise to engage with various aspects of her community, Hannah is not only an older woman, but also a mother, friend, nurturer, baker, church member, craft-maker, citizen, and so on. Such questions guide us to see the object as well as the subject, to understand key subject-object relations as special things that are in mutually influencing relationship with larger contexts such as time.

As material theorists have noted, "...one might hope that a sense of the way in which materiality grounds our understanding of the human world can act as a firm basis for informed opinion" (Graves-Brown, 2000, p. 7). The introduction of this lens is well timed, considering the movement to understand meaning-making in aging-well research. A materialist lens responds to two needs: (a) a way to explore meaning-making as it pertains to aging well, and (b) the development of theorizing for studying later-life relationships with physical contexts.

In this paper, I have introduced a materialist lens to aging-well research. I have identified and illustrated three key assumptions by referring to the relationship that Hannah and House built through the latter half of the twentieth century in western Canada. In addition, I have discussed the potential for applying a materialist lens in aging-well research by considering how this lens directs us to see the physicality and influence of

objects in older adults' lives as they make sense of such transitions as widowhood. Aging well may be understood as a process in which older adults construct and re-construct a sense of self relative to changing levels of resources and activity amid later-life events and transitions. The study of later-life relationships with special things, such as the relationship that Hannah and House built, is one way to study this identity construction.

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Paper Three – Aging Well and Identity: Older Women's Material Relationships with Special Things[6]

"They're only things after all. They seem to be more than

that.

[long pause]" (Sophie)

Identity construction is an area of growing interest in aging-well research. Increasingly, aging well is understood in terms of an ongoing, open-ended process of making sense of one's self and one's aging relative to various contexts (Chapman, in press; Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, & Robinson, 1999; Dittmann-Kohli, 1990; Phelan, Anderson, LaCroix, & Larson, 2004; Wong, 2000). One way to study this area is to consider meaning-making (Westerhof, Dittmann-Kohli, & Bode, 2003).

Individuals make meaning, and more specifically construct a sense of self, through interaction with material objects (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p. 28; Dittmar, 1992, p. 3; Ingold, 2000; Kamptner, 1991). Gerontologists have long observed that older adults tend to hold onto special things in later life (Butler & Lewis, 1973, pp. 24-25). Over the last thirty years, one recommendation seen in practice is to encourage older

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[6] **Target journal:** "*The Journal of Material Culture* is a new interdisciplinary journal designed to cater for the increasing interest in material culture studies. It is concerned with the relationship between artefacts and social relations irrespective of time and place and aims to systematically explore the linkage between the construction of social identities and the production and use of culture.

The Journal of Material Culture will transcend traditional disciplinary and cultural boundaries drawing on a wide range of disciplines including anthropology, archaeology, design studies, history, human geography, museology and ethnography. It will aim to promote and develop a general comparative and international perspective by publishing papers on theory and methodology, interpretive strategies and substantive studies of key themes and issues." From 24 Feb 2005: http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalScope.aspx?pid=105668&sc=1

adults to bring special things with them to continuing care facilities toward making them homelike (Butler & Lewis, 1973, pp. 24-25; Day, Carreon, & Stump, 2000; Namazi, Rosner, & Rechlin, 1991; Wapner, Demick, & Redondo, 1990). Therapeutic designers and reminiscence workers use culturally relevant designs, objects, photos, textures, smells, and sounds (Burnside, 1995; Day & Cohen, 2000; Mills & Coleman, 1994; Woods, 1999). Researchers have reported that special things can help older adults with dementia to maintain a sense of identity (Morgan & Stewart, 1999). In other words, material culture, though not always labelled as such, has been acknowledged as a potential resource for later-life identity construction (Blaikie, 1999, p. 203). Yet, past work has focused on older adults' thoughts and feelings about their special things with little understanding of how the physicality of objects plays a role in identity construction.

To understand meaning-making, researchers must study not only people but also their objects (de Grazia, Quilligan, & Stallybrass, 1996; Latour, 2004; Morley, 2001; Williams & Costall, 2000). A materialist lens responds to this need as a theoretical perspective that directs researchers to see the materiality of physical objects. This lens is being used in material culture studies as well as literary studies, anthropology, history, and sociology as researchers shift from distinguishing subjects and objects as separate entities to exploring their interdependence. Interest lies not only with how people make and assign meaning to objects, but also with what physical items "afford" (Gibson, 1979, pp. 138-139) or enable people to do

(Brown, 2004; Ingold, 2000). As animate beings, we move in and around the physical (Bender, 2002); the relationship is mutually involving.

My goal in this paper is to begin to explore how the materiality of subject-object relations contributes to identity construction in later life and thereby to aging well. I have two objectives. First, I employ a materialist lens to begin to describe how relationships with special things contribute to individuals' sense of self and of their aging. Second, I seek to inform materialist theorizing from an aging-well research perspective.

Background

Past research suggests that the nature of relationships with special things varies according to gender and age. We know that older, Western, female research participants in the late twentieth century tended to cherish objects that reflected and supported relationships with family and friends (Cram & Paton, 1993; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981, pp. 89-113; Rubinstein, 1987). This appears to be consistent with contemporary socialization of women as kinkeepers to nurture and mediate in families (Rosenthal, 1985; Strong-Boag, 1991). We also know that individuals who cherish objects on this basis tend to be less materialistic (Belk, 1985; Rudmin, 1990), or less concerned with the role that possessions play in their lives (Richins, 1994). If older women cherish special things, those things would seem to be very special.

To explore how relationships with special things contribute to individuals' sense of self and of their aging, I conducted an exploratory,

qualitative inquiry in which I interviewed five women from a western Canadian city[7]. I chose to interview older women in part because, based on past research, if they have special things, they would appear to have particularly rich personal experiences with those things. As I wished to interview women who were reflecting on their aging and sense of self as older adults, I recruited individuals who are 75 years and older. I anticipated that they would likely be widowed and/or experiencing some frailty or home downsizing [Connidis, 2001, pp. 21(Table 2.1), 73, 154]. I asked colleagues and friends for names and contact information of potential participants. Sophie, Muriel, Hannah, Irene, and Gwen[8] were recruited based on their ability and willingness to speak in their homes about their experiences with special things (Patton, 2002, p. 237). At the end of the first few interviews, I asked some of the women for names and contact information of additional potential participants. The participants share socio-cultural and historical contexts, as they were born within a single generation (between 1914 and 1930) on the Canadian prairies. All have white, European-Canadian heritage and are either married or widowed. Two of the participants are relatively frail; however, all of the women were living in their own homes at the time of the interviews. The sample is relatively homogeneous allowing me to focus on older women's relationships with special things in late, twentieth-century, western Canada.

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[7] For additional information on my methodology, please see the Appendix at the end of the dissertation.

[8] To ensure privacy, I assigned pseudonyms to all participants and individuals that they named.

I conducted unstructured interviews to begin to describe how the materiality of subject-object relations contributes to identity construction in later life. I conducted and tape-recorded two interviews with each of the participants (first interviews lasted 1.5-2.0 hours; follow-up interviews lasted 0.75-2.0 hours). Initially, I asked participants to tell me about their special things. I asked about the things' importance and how they make a difference in participants' lives. During and after the interviews, I noted participants' key words and how they handled and kept their objects. In follow-up interviews, I asked for clarification about special things that seemed particularly important to participants. As I began to analyse the data, I asked about participants' concerns about where their special things would go in the future. I transcribed the audiotapes verbatim. I noted emotion in the transcripts and used italics to indicate words that participants emphasized. I began the analysis as I conducted the first round of interviews. This step informed my follow-up questions in the second round of interviews and my decision that the data from these five participants provided rich evidence with which to respond to my research question: How do relationships with special things contribute to individuals' sense of self and of their aging?

To analyse the data, I employed three materialist assumptions. The first is that humans and physical things are interdependent (de Grazia et al., 1996; Latour, 2004; Morley, 2001; Williams & Costall, 2000). To understand people, we must also study the things with which they interact

(Brown, 2004; Graves-Brown, 2000; Ingold, 2000). Second, to study meaning-making and more specifically identity construction, we must study not only a subject or an object, but also the subject-object relationship. With an object in view, we can begin to study the meaning-making that arises from a relationship (Brown, 2004; de Grazia et al., 1996). Third, subject-object relations exist in larger contexts (Bender, 2001). Whether time is conceptualized as history, as that shared by a group, or as individual development, time is particularly significant for this study as we consider aging. The implication of subject-object relations existing in context is that meaning is made not only through subject-object interaction but also between subject-object relationships and their contexts.

In this next section, I introduce the results of the data analysis. I begin with three sub-themes and then build upon them to discuss an overarching theme. The first sub-theme focuses on how participants' special things are physically unique. Second, special things provide physical access to meaning. Third, special things are physically demanding. These sub-themes revolve around an overarching theme of the data: maintaining access to a few special tangible things is a physical need, not just a desire. This is a need to keep a few things to continue to construct meaning about self and aging.

Sub-Themes and Theme:

Sub-Theme #1 – Special Things: Unique Physical Relationships of People and Objects

Special things are one-of-a kind items. Sophie stated, "You can't replace those things [like her late son's green cap]". Irene also stated unequivocally:

> You *can't* replace those kinds of things [letters and cards from her wedding 60 years ago]! You know, that letter was written by some people that were, that are already gone. And, the cards and, that was so personal. This [referring to the chesterfield and the table] isn't personal....to me this is all replaceable [laughing a bit] (Irene).

Irene's comment about the personal nature of special things demonstrates how humans and their things are interdependent. Through such interrelationship, a person creates a sense of self (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p. 28). Irene's chesterfield is a comfortable place to sit; however, she does not appear to have a meaningful relationship with it. A similar chesterfield would serve as well, but her letters and cards are irreplaceable. The unique quality of a special thing is a reflection of a specific interrelationship of person, physical item, and the meaning that they produce through their interaction (Latour, 2004).

Sophie observes that her photos are so important that they feel part of her:

> You know, it's strange. I say I would take my photographs with me [in future moves], but I hardly *ever* take them

> out....maybe twice a year?... You feel as though they're part of you; and you can't part with them. (Sophie)

Since they are part of her, they are unique objects. When asked what her special things mean to her, Hannah also identified with them: "To me they're, they're my life. They're my life [higher pitched tone]. Part of what I've done, part of what I've, what I've seen" (Hannah). Her long-time physical relationships with her special things suggest an ongoing process of constructing how she sees herself and what she has accomplished as she has aged.

Upon reflection, Irene observed that, "You still want to cling to something, from your past.... You can't get rid of the, *I* wouldn't get rid of *all* my past [pause]" (Irene). By physically keeping a few special things, she is literally holding onto part of her past sense of self and thereby making sense of her aging through time. A person-object relationship can become so interdependent that individuals may come to regard a special thing as being part of themselves. Out of this interdependence, meaning, in the form of identity, can arise. In this way, we and inanimate items constitute each other (Brown, 2004), and thereby create a unique thing. Even though two objects may appear alike at first glance, once one of those things becomes special to someone, that thing becomes unique and irreplaceable.

Sub-Theme #2 – Special Things: Physical Access to Meaning

Special things appear to be invaluable to participants. They are beyond monetary value and may not be functionally important. Things are

special for accessing the meaning that arises in person-object relationships. Hannah has kept many small gifts from grandchildren and former music students. They adorn her living room and she takes pride in remembering from whom each item came: "You just value something.... You don't know *why* you value it. You know you value the person that gave it to you. And there's a, similarly, there's a *love* connection in that gift" (Hannah). By keeping the things visible, Hannah recalls her family and professional relationships with the givers, and thereby has evidence of her past, current, and future identities. Similarly, for Sophie, even though her photo albums are packed away, she knows that they are available to her. Those albums provide tangible access to a sense of self.

The loss of a special thing may result in the loss of the opportunity to access and create meaning. That meaning may be self-meaning or identity, and thus, a sense of loss of self might result. This is evident in the theft of a ring that for Muriel meant that she had lost part of the self-meaning that she had once constructed:

> It was made by a friend of mine out of diamonds that my grandmother had.... It wasn't worth very much because the diamonds were old and had an old-fashioned cut. But it was very-, I *still* think of it! And still think that I lost a piece of myself at that time...it was just a piece of me that has disappeared. (Muriel)

This sense of loss may be particularly potent when a person has no control over the physical loss and when special things represent family (Detzner, Bell, & Stum, 1991). Muriel has had to reconstruct a sense of self relative to family and friend.

Gwen values her special things often for the sense of family identity that is accessible through them:

> It's not the objects themselves, because I think in terms of monetary value, *none* of the things that I've mentioned are worth huge dollars. So it's *nothing* to do with the fact that they [very slight pause], of their intrinsic monetary value, that's not the point at all. It's, it's the, the sense of continuity of our family.... (Gwen)

Families age as they travel through history. As a group, family members make sense of who they are. The physical loss of heirlooms can threaten families' sense of shared identity (Curasi, Price, & Arnould, 2004). Gwen speaks about a mantle clock that has been in her family for generations. Without being able to see and handle this heavy, oak piece, part of her family story would be less accessible. Even though the clock no longer works, the physical presence of that thing is quite critical to her and her family:

> It [heirloom clock] wasn't working, when I got it. It had stopped working before it ever came into my possession.... every once in a while I think, "I should see if I can get that

> old thing going again." But, like most people, I've got clocks all over my house, you know. You *do*.... But, this clock, non-functional as it is, has a place of honour in the house, and it isn't hidden away somewhere. It's on top of a bookcase and when people come in, they *often* ask about the clock. (Gwen)

By displaying the clock in a prominent place, not only is Gwen reinvesting in that sense of family identity but also honouring the actual clock. The physical presence of things serves as a focal point with which to continue to construct identity over time.

Irene has two handmade quilts from her late mother. Rather than using them for warmth, Irene keeps the quilts for their connection with her mother.

> She gave them to, to me, to keep us [Irene's family] warm and cozy, and ah, she *knew* I *valued* them because she made them. [pause] And, I used them and used them, and now I don't use them, because I'm, you know, they're sort [laughing] sort of a keepsake now. (Irene)

The quilts do not fit her current bed. That they are worn reflects the longevity of this subject-object relationship. Irene stores them in her cedar hope chest, a special thing from her parents. That she keeps the quilts in this other special thing suggests that the quilts' presence in her home is significant. The quilts are a tangible demonstration to Irene of her own

identities of daughter and of mother. As she anticipates passing the quilts down to a grandchild, she acknowledges her own mortality.

Muriel observes that she cherishes some things that are rarely used in the present:

> Well, these are doilies [from mother's and grandmother's trousseaus] and we *never* use doilies anymore! [laughing] And, I decided that, ah, this [displayed on brass hoops on a dining room wall] was a way to show doilies, show a piece of the way that people lived in the past. (Muriel)

Not only is Muriel demonstrating the importance of these doilies to herself as a reminder of her identities as daughter and granddaughter, but through their display, she shares a bit of western Canada's material past with family and friends. Muriel is making sense of her aging by demonstrating her membership in the past relative to her mother and grandmother and to her larger socio-cultural context. She offers others a tangible link to that past. Special things are important for the physical access that they provide to meaning about participants' identities, at individual, familial, and societal levels.

Sub-Theme #3 – Special Things: Physically Demanding

According to participants, special things demand physical care to maintain them and to maintain a relationship with them. This maintenance can be relatively costly in terms of time and space. Sophie states bluntly:

> I gave her [daughter] a big cut-glass bowl. I have two, and I gave her her favourite, the one she wants.... *Oh*, they take up so much space and they take *care*. You have to take them out and *wash* them, and put them back *in* for a [slightly exasperated laugh] for another spell. What for? They're a nuisance. (Sophie)

Muriel also describes the bother of maintaining her family's doilies: "Every now and then I take them off [the hoop frames] and wash them and put them back on. It's a pain in the neck" (Muriel). Gwen is interested in having her clock repaired but not in winding it every day. In some cases, these things are slated for passing along to others in the near future. Yet, other things are very special items that participants wish to keep until they die. An ambivalence of cherishing a thing yet being frustrated by its upkeep is quite clear among participants.

Even amid this ambivalence, a curatorial instinct is apparent. Museum curators, sometimes known as keepers, have the responsibility to ensure that artifacts are researched, interpreted, and physically maintained in perpetuity for society. A parallel role is evident among private individuals on behalf of families (Curasi et al., 2004; McCracken, 1988, pp. 44-53) and among participants:

> Anything that I value represents something....that means caring for it. It represents some things that have happened to me in my life, and the stage of my life that I value, not

> necessarily that anybody else is going to bother, but *I* value it; therefore, I care for it. I look after it. (Muriel)

A sense of responsibility to generations past and future is evident:

> Well, ahm, I suppose I'm unwilling to give it up [referring to her great-grandmother's embroidery sampler; laughing a bit]. I'm unwilling to pass it on, until I've ah, or at least completed [transcribing] the diary [great-grandmother's], which is associated with it [sampler].... I guess that I want to preserve it. I want to be sure that it gets passed on to somebody that appreciates it, that recognizes its worth. (Muriel)

If Muriel cannot find a family member that meets these criteria, she is considering physically giving some things that have public, socio-cultural significance to museums.

Finding the right keeper of items was also true of things with private meaning: "Well, I want someone who's going to take care of it [china]; that's the thing. And, my daughter will take care of it. She appreciates little things that are of less consequence; she values them" (Hannah). Irene demonstrated great concern that her cedar chest be physically cared for and was considering whom in her network had demonstrated potential for this responsibility:

> It's [cedar chest] going to carry on! [higher pitched, laughing]....I think that he [one grandson] will value it, in

> another respect, because [of] what it is.... And, where it came from, like from me, and, that, just the wood part, because he is so into, ahm, *natural* kind of...I know his houses will be, you know, like an older house, but it's going to be *beautifully* done. The wood is gonna *shine*! It's going to be polished to the, you know, high gleam, sort of thing. Ahm, and I think that, [slight pause] he'll probably put it [chest] somewhere, that it'll be of value to *him*. (Irene)

Gwen is concerned not only with finding the right keeper but also with the timing of the passing down of the special thing:

> I have also in my possession, some things that belonged to my father who was...at Vimy Ridge in World War One.... I have his diaries and, ah, all of his discharge papers, and so on. And, I have a son who's a, a lawyer by profession, but a historian by inclination, really [laughing], and he is, he's going to have that little bundle of things some day, and I know they'll be very meaningful to him.... as a matter of fact, he now is really quite settled in his, in a home.... I think next time he comes, I'm going to give them to him.... he'll take very good care of them.... (Gwen)

Somehow the special-ness of a special thing is perceived as requiring particular physical care to maintain it in a family over time.

However, even if participants perceived that others would care about certain things, occasionally potential keepers were not interested in assuming responsibility for the physical care of the things. Muriel described how she asked her nephew:

> "Steven, you can have one of those pictures [Muriel's mother's paintings] on the wall. Which one would you like?" Well, my mother was dead before Steven was born!... So, he doesn't remember his grandmother. And, so, he looked at the paintings, and...he said, "No, I don't want any of them." [laughing]... Steven wasn't interested in them. [laughing] And I can understand that. (Muriel)

Muriel gave her nephew an opportunity to take a turn at physically keeping the paintings to help in the ongoing construction of identity: family, her mother's, Muriel's. From Muriel's later-life perspective, this meaning-making is important. Steven, who may not relate to his late grandmother, is at a different place in his life course. Currently, he may not be concerned with physically holding onto a thing to maintain his family identity.

Theme – A Physical Need for a Few Special Things

Even with their things' non-functionality and demand for care, participants anticipated that they would keep a few special things, through whatever transitions, like downsizing a home, might occur. Sophie, as a daughter, felt very strongly about holding onto a few special things until the end of her life:

> Even if we [Sophie and her husband] had to move into a one-room or two-room apartment, it [mother's embroidery sampler] would go with me. Yes, it would.... It's hard to find reasons for the things you do. Sometimes, sometimes, it's irrational, maybe. (Sophie)

Keeping it in her home is important to her. Even if later-life relationships with special things appear unreasonable or illogical, they provide unique, tangible access to intangible meaning. By keeping special things, participants continue to construct a sense of self, as they age. Sophie, as a mother, reflected on one of her late son's hats:

> I've sometimes thought that, that *things* last longer than people... After someone has passed away, you come across something that they've had and it's still *perfectly* good and you have, the thought passes through your mind, "Those things outlast the people who owned them, sometimes."... We went on a [family] trip to Alaska. We bought him [late son] a funny hat; it was crocheted and had this lime green and red in it. It was *horrible*....and he wore it!...[laughing] But, [sudden change to serious, deeper tone] I've got that cap. I had to have that cap. I kept it. (Sophie)

Keeping his hat was fundamentally important to her.

The feelings that participants had about particular special things were very strong. Gwen describes the sale of the family cottage after the death of her parents:

> It got sold with a great many things in it that had belonged to my parents. And, my sister and I, both, were very, felt very sad about that, afterwards. But one of the things that was rescued was the clock. And, my brother took it to his home, ahm, and he said to me, "The, *your* clock", because it was al-, it was always known as my clock, "was there." (Gwen)

Such high importance is placed on these few special things that access to them is akin to access to a person; if in danger, a special thing must be "rescued".

This need was evident as participants discussed their downsizing of homes due to widowhood, location of family members, and/or increasing frailty. Participants have indicated that they plan to distribute most of their special things to others. However, the presence of a few things is absolutely critical to making sense of their aging selves:

> Well, you *gotta* hold onto some*thing*!! [said loudly] You know like, ah [longish pause]. How, how would I know how to explain it [said softly]? That's, that's ahm, [pause] *oh*, you-, *no*, that's part of the past. That's part of the past. You can't, you don't want to get rid of, ahm – I've lost a husband,

> and all this kind of thing. You do lose. So, you still want to cling to something, from your past. (Irene)

Later-life reflection on loss is not an unusual part of making sense of aging; however, at the same time, a sense of what one is and has is also part of this meaning-making (Dittmann-Kohli, 1990).

Irene's determination to keep the chest is met by an equal determination not to keep other things. Prior to a move to live closer to family several years ago, Irene cut up her sixty-year old wedding letters and cards that she had stored in her cedar chest:

> I, ah, I, ah, [pause] cut them up [said softly]. And, you know, and it's the hardest thing. I don't why it was so bad [difficult] for me to do. It was *so* hard. You know, like I don't know. [slight pause] But that's, that. (Irene)

Her hesitation hints at the powerful significance of the physical presence of special things, for "...the tearing up of photographs [for example] severs someone's connection to the past by destroying its tangibilized [*sic*] reality" (Young & Wallendorf, 1989, p. 37). That older women at the turn of this most recent century tend to value objects that reflect interpersonal relationships (Cram & Paton, 1993; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981, pp. 89-113; Rubinstein, 1987) suggests that Irene was putting an end to a particular sense of self and possibly to certain interpersonal relationships. Irene's cutting of the letters and cards also cut ties between her and at least part of the meaning made in the past. Just as she had a need

to destroy the physical letters and cards, participants all demonstrated a physical need to keep a few special things for the rest of their lives.

Conceptually Developing the Materialist Lens – Integration

Applying a materialist lens means focusing on the physical relationship of subject and object. Since these data are about a few older women in a specific period in Western society, an opportunity exists to inform materialist theorizing from an aging-well research perspective. Participants regard special things as physically unique and a way to access meaning. They demonstrate that keeping these things demands physical care. Further, these women specify a few special things and articulate a need to keep them close, whether in sight or in storage in their homes. These particular person-object relationships appear to be so highly interdependent that person, object, and meaning appear to be "integrated" (Gwen). Next, I consider and discuss this concept of integration.

Gwen describes how, over time, some things become part of a family's effects. They become special things that are so interdependent with family members and their sense of shared identity that the things become integrated into that family's existence:

> ...my parents both died. So, because she [older sister] was the one who had married, had a home, and so on, a lot of the possessions that should, probably should have been divided amongst us [the siblings], actually went to her with the idea that she would then distribute things to each of us, the rest of

> us (there were four children in the family), when we had somewhere to keep things. But you know what happens, things become integrated into your [a person's] home and your life, and your own children become attached to them and it doesn't happen. (Gwen)

Gwen suggests that the distribution of special things beyond her sister's immediate family is not happening. Gwen's term, integration, describes well the manner in which people, material items, and meaning may become interwoven. They become particular subject-object relations that are part of an individual's, and possibly a family's, sense of identity. Gwen describes her nieces and nephews associating certain objects with their mother, her sister, though Gwen associates them with her own mother, their grandmother. Through integration, a particular subject-object relationship becomes personally involving, until the person lets it go, the object is no longer available, and/or the meaning that is being made has changed in some way.

Integration is evident in Muriel's observations about her relationship with her great-grandmother's sampler: "I just have that *thing*, I have that *string* that has attached me to the nineteenth century! [laughing] And, ah, I don't want to let go. [pause]....I'm on the other end of it" (Muriel). Muriel feels connected to previous generations through this special thing through which she constructs a sense of self as an individual and as a woman in this family. She is attached to the material item, to family members, to western

Canadian history and society, and to the meaning arising from these interrelationships. Such integration suggests that such subject-object relations are "matters of concern" (Latour, 2004, p. 157), "so beautifully complex and entangled that it [they] resist[s] being treated as a matter of fact" (p. 159). Integration appears to be a process in which animate and inanimate parts become so interdependent with arising meaning that the objects become particularly special. Considering that the meaning that participants have made with these few special things tends to be associated with loved ones, future materialist theorizing should consider whether integration might vary according to age and social constructions of gender.

Irene's determination to keep her cedar hope chest until her death provides insight into the materiality of integration. As a hope chest, it has lent itself to storing tangible 'tools' for a marriage, as well as intangible dreams. The long, heavy, honey-coloured chest is solid evidence of her late parents who gave it to her. Irene has likely opened the chest countless times, put things into it, taken things out, dusted it inside and out. She has probably moved it and watched it being moved. The chest has witnessed her marriage and her subsequent life in a new city. She has discovered scratches and gouges in the wood. She has made meaning with it about herself and her family. It has become a part of her life; she is part of the chest's story. She wants to have it close, not only in her home, but visible. Too large for her bedroom, the chest is currently stored in a closet. She will have to move furniture to make room for the chest in the bedroom. She will not pass it

down in her lifetime: "My daughter says, 'Oh, *Mom*, why do you want to keep it? You know, like'. I said, 'I'm *not* getting rid of *this*. You can get rid of anything *else*, but I'm not getting *rid* of it'." Over time, Irene and this wooden box have woven meaning (Ingold, 2000). The hope chest is a materialization of identity. That sense of daughter, married person, mother, and widow has been created in partnership with the chest. It began as a conventional hope chest. Irene brought her life experiences. Together, Irene, the chest, and emerging meaning have become a tangible demonstration of that which matters to Irene. The chest does not simply serve as a vehicle for meaning, but is an ongoing, active part of the meaning-making.

Discussion – An Embarrassment of Riches

What is compelling about these data is that even as participants clearly demonstrate a physical need to keep one or two special things, they also observe that: "Material things don't, ah, matter so much to me" (Irene). A perception, that desiring material things is somehow immoral, is shared. Muriel remarks that, "Well, it's a thing. And, ah, one is not supposed to place much value in *things*" (Muriel). Gwen spoke of raising her children not to be swayed by objects because other parts of life are more important:

> I'm *not* a very acquisitive person, and, I feel, and I've said this to my daughter and of course, she agrees, life, our lives have been so full of so many good things and so many good people, and so on, *things* are just not as important as people. And, I think I've tried to teach my children that over the

> years, and not to put a huge premium [on] acquiring and owning things, because at the end of the day, they're just *things*, and money can buy many of them.... (Gwen)

Sophie spoke almost as much to herself as to me when she observed that:

> Well, you would have to be sensible. You know, you think you can't part with things but you do, and once they're gone, they're gone. That's it. You know. I don't know why we hang onto things we like. We're like magpies, I guess. (Sophie)

Hannah pinpointed a similar perspective to a specific moment in time when:

> Johnnie went to the china cabinet to show it [cut-glass, crystal bowl] to Rebecca, my little grandchildren, two grandchildren, and it got broken. They dropped it. And I cried. My mother was here. And, she said, "Hannah, it's *only* material. It's only *material*." She says, "You'll be so glad it wasn't one of the children that got hurt." And that's what I say, it isn't valued, really. It's *only* material. (Hannah)

Considering that participants demonstrated a physical need to keep a few special things despite this shared perception reveals the depth of their need. Clearly the visual and/or tangible presence of these select things is critical. Yet, participants appear to feel a sense of embarrassment by their possession of special things.

Jones & Stallybrass (2000) suggest that this kind of ambivalence has characterized Western society since the 1600s. In their study of clothing at the beginning of the modern capitalist economy, they observe that in 2000:

> We are here at the end of a long trajectory that situates us as subjects (or rather, "individuals") whose interest in objects (including clothes) is characterized by disavowal. To care about things is to appear "fetishistic." Nowhere have antithetical political positions had more in common than in the denunciation of the materialism of modern life and of our supposed obsession with "mere" things. The force of that denunciation depends upon the assumption of a place before the fall into materialism, a society where people are spiritually pure, uncontaminated by the objects around them. (Jones & Stallybrass, 2000, p. 7)

Capitalist imperialist society has been characterized by a separation of subject and object including a dismissal of how humans live in and with physical environments (Brown, 2004; de Grazia et al., 1996; Latour, 2004). Yet, we are physical beings living in physical contexts.

Materialism as a concept may be understood in several ways. It may be described as, "a value that represents the individual's perspective regarding the role possessions should play in his/her life" (Richins, 1994, p. 522). On the one hand, someone who places great importance on possessions may be described as materialistic (Belk, 1984). Participants, as

members of Western society, appear to have been socialized to believe that high materialism is to be avoided. On the other hand, an instrumental type of materialism may be critical for enabling individuals to accomplish tasks (Belk, 1985; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p. 231). Jones & Stallybrass (2000) comment on how material items create us as persons and serve as "material memories" (p. 32). Materialism in this sense may be understood as a state in which form is given to meaning; materiality is a form of embodiment (Rubinstein & Parmelee, 1992). This is consistent with participants' perception that their special things embody them and their sense of self.

Participants' materialist ambivalence could be a reflection of a later-life perspective based on the need to get rid of extra stuff as they downsize homes. Some researchers have suggested that a disinterest in material things may characterize later life (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981, pp. 96, 194; Cumming & Henry, 1961, p. 73; Tornstam, 1989). Or, perhaps, participants are members of a generation that may be typified by this ambivalence. They experienced several periods of history in which material things have had a significant absence or presence. Born into the 1920s' "credit revolution" (Strong-Boag, 1988, p. 115), participants initially lived in a society characterized by mass production, mass communication, and a rapid growth in access to consumer goods. Yet, these women were also children of parents who had not had such access prior to the First World War. Participants might have only heard of hard times, until experiencing

them first-hand during the Great Depression. As children and young adults, they likely had to learn to "make do" (Strong-Boag, 1986, p. 42), to make ends meet with fewer resources (Belk, 1985). Even into the 1950s, as young parents, they may have had to scrimp and save to afford a move to suburbia (Strong-Boag, 1991). Participants' ambivalence to things may reflect shifting dynamics of consumer society in the early to mid-twentieth century.

However, for all the economic hard times they may have experienced, participants have also lived in a society increasingly characterized by mass consumption. Since the mid-twentieth century, Westerners have had a tremendous choice of products and have come to engage in consumption based less on need than on desire (Blaikie, 1999, p.86; Hepworth, 1996). Given this trend, participants might be expected to be comfortable with things. Yet, not all of Western society has supported this consumption. Even by mid-century, suburbia had become criticized for "...its secularism, superficiality, and materialism" (Strong-Boag, 1991, p. 499). Participants lived amid a proscriptive norm that they must be vigilant not to "fall into materialism" (Jones & Stallybrass, 2000, p. 7; Strong-Boag, 1991). The effect of this norm, combined with socialization of women as kinkeepers, might be evident in the pattern that older women tend to be less materialistic than young adults (Belk, 1985; Richins, 1994; Rudmin, 1990). If older women do cherish any thing, that thing is typically associated with loved ones (Cram & Paton, 1993; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981, pp. 89-113; Rubinstein, 1987).

Several interpretations may be made from these exploratory data. Anti-materialism may be a reflection of: (a) a later-life perspective, (b) a Western norm that people should be concerned only with the intangible, and/or (c) a generational, gender effect that family and friends, not things, should be valued. However, participants have also demonstrated that at least a few special things are physically necessary to their aging. That losing a special thing feels like losing a part of one's self demonstrates a person-object oneness. Gwen brings experiences to her mantle clock; the clock moulds her sense of self and sense of being a family member. She is a physical being living in a physical world with multiple senses; the clock is tangible, visual, and potentially audible (if repaired and wound regularly). The clock materializes an integration of Gwen and her ongoing construction of self as she ages:

> I think like all these possessions, particularly ones that you *know* are *rooted* in your past, it gives you a great sense of continuity to realize that *that* is still intact, and you've cared for it, and your mother cared for it, and probably, her mother before that, *and* that it will go to someone else in *our* family who will *know* the story as much as we know about it and will care for it as well. I think there is a certain comfort as you get older in knowing that, you know, there is some ah, ah, in spite of our own awareness of our own, ah, ah, you know, the limits of life span, that there is some continuity,

> and ah, ah, you know, immortality in certain ways, that I, I guess we're all, we all like to think that ah, you know, there's *some thing* after we're gone that's going to have some continuity of family and objects that mean a lot to your family, and so on. I think it's *that*. (Gwen)

Despite materialist ambivalence, participants' integration with a few special things appears to be part of their process of making sense of self and of their aging.

Conclusion – Aging Well with Special Things

Keeping special things is not an easy task. It may require time, space, and care to ensure that these things and relationships with them are maintained. While some researchers are exploring families' efforts to preserve heirlooms across generations (e.g., Curasi et al., 2004), this paper focuses on participants' immediate physical need to keep a few special things until the end of life. How do relationships with special things contribute to individuals' sense of self and of their aging? Physical access to a few special things appears critical to meaning-making. Objects' materiality might outlast participants; however, the integration of person, object, and meaning has a kind of mortality. If the person is gone, much of the meaning becomes inaccessible because the person cannot give voice to it. If the object is gone, some of the meaning, as it is attached to the object, may be lost. This may include loss of self-meaning. Further, the opportunity to create new meaning specific to that object is lost.

Conceptually, aging well is understood as an ongoing process of constructing identity and a sense of one's aging. For these participants, embracing a certain kind of materiality appears to be one way to make this meaning. Aging well, then, appears to be a process that is physically situated for some people. To construct a sense of self and of one's aging may mean, in part, understanding one's self as a physical being integrated with physical objects and meaning.

In this exploratory work, my observations of each physical object are not detailed. I did not seek to document physical features toward studying how each object afforded specific actions and meaning-making by participants. Rather, my intention has been to consider physical materiality at a broad level. My focus rests with physical accessibility of special things and what that affords participants: opportunities to construct meaning. Further, I have not sought to identify the identities that participants are constructing. Whether or not participants still have the things that they wish to have may make a difference in their abilities to make sense of their selves and of their aging. If, with the theft of a special ring, Muriel feels as though a part of her sense of self is lost, does that compromise her ongoing identity construction and sense of how she is aging? Future materialist research of later-life identity construction should explore the more specific, physical affordance of special things. For example, a materialist analysis of Irene and her cedar hope chest could be a rich study of a long-time, subject-object relationship in the context of twentieth-century, western Canadian society.

After centuries of treating inanimate things as secondary to humans, interest in what objects do, in relationship with humans, is reflected in a movement called "new materialism" (Brown, 2004, p. 7). In aging-well research, a materialist lens can highlight the physicality of later life. For the duration of our physical existence, we are physical beings, with physical senses for making meaning. In situations of high interdependence, as with some special things over time, subjects and objects appear to be integrated with the meaning that they produce. The manner in which participants and a few special things were so integrated suggests a path to pursue by applying an aging-well perspective to materialist research. Integration may prove to be a useful concept in future materialist theorizing in terms of age and gender.

In the opening quotation of this paper, Sophie observes that things seem to be more than just inanimate matter. If integrated, special things are part of participants' very lives. The presence of special things can influence how people make sense of self and of aging. Without the person, the object, and/or the meaning being made, loss can occur, including a perceived partial loss of self. How integration happens may vary according to what objects afford and according to generational membership, gender, age, socio-economic status, historical and socio-cultural contexts, particular events and transitions, and so on. This paper offers preliminary evidence for considering why: "you *gotta* hold onto some*thing*!!" (Irene) in later life.

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Appendix – Methodology

For the empirical part of this dissertation, I have conducted an exploratory, qualitative inquiry. My research question was: How do relationships with special things contribute to individuals' sense of self and of their aging? I have engaged this question from an interpretive and dialectical position informed by a conceptual framework developed in Paper One and Paper Two. In this Appendix, I outline the foundation for this empirical work (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003). I begin by describing my methodological position and how it shaped this inquiry, beginning with my data collection. Then, I discuss how I applied my conceptual framework to analyse the data. Finally, I describe how I have sought to work in a rigorous manner.

In my research, I seek to be aware of my constructivist worldview, historical and socio-cultural contexts, transdisciplinary approach, and conceptual lenses, and how they, all, influence my interpretive work (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). I assume that multiple realities exist and that knowledge is constructed relative to: (a) underlying systems of shared beliefs, (b) what is already understood about a phenomenon, and (c) the researchers involved (Guba, 1990). Based on moving back and forth between personal and shared understanding of the phenomenon and based on my location in time and society (Palmer, 1969, pp. 10, 24, 118-119), I interpret a phenomenon accordingly.

My socio-historical location is Western society in what some have called post-modernity and what others have suggested as being beyond post-modernity (Latour, 2004; Marcus, 1994). At times, we appear to be in a mode of transformation, fragmentation, and instability in which cultural, theoretical, and political traditions are deconstructed (Best & Kellner, 1991, pp. 3, 30, 256). Living with multiplicity and juxtapositions of apparent opposites (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 11) is becoming increasingly familiar. For example, we live in both real and virtual time and space. Culture is not created strictly through face-to-face or even in real-time (e.g., via telephone) interactions. We often connect in cyberspace, relatively comfortable with being out-of-time with each other. Increasingly, visual and auditory media are digitized, resulting in both an embracing of the virtual and a new awareness of the things that are still tangible (Brown, 2004). Humanity is on the move across political and economic boundaries through migration, business, and leisure travel, yet the concept of home continues to be meaningful (Hecht, 2001; Mallett, 2004). We are ever more consumer oriented even in creating new markets of consumers like the anti-aging "grey market" (Blaikie, 1999, p. 22; Gilleard, 1996; Katz, 2001-2002) yet we co-exist with underlying societal norms against "superficial materialism" (Belk, 1992, p. 37). An ambivalent attitude in which people might admonish materialism yet also identify with a few special things characterizes the data discussed in Paper Three. We live in a mode in which binary thinking (e.g., subject versus object) captures less well a growing

understanding of the complexity of phenomena (e.g., subject-object interdependence) (Ingold, 2000).

Working from a human ecological perspective [as discussed in the Overview], I perceive older adults as parts of holistic systems of person-context interdependence. I am motivated to support quality of life in later life. As I employ this value in my work (Ray, 2003), I seek to offer researchers, practitioners, and later-life families preliminary evidence that resonates with their study of and experiences with later-life relationships with special things (Thorne, Reimer Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004).

I seek to enhance understanding through informed questioning and interpretation (Thorne et al., 2004). As a framework for my empirical work, I developed a conceptual understanding of aging well (Paper One) and adopted a materialist lens (Paper Two). To inform my understanding of later-life relationships with special things, I engaged several bodies of literature including those around cherished objects and attachment to place. While these areas draw on social psychology and sociology, they also bridge sub-fields of gerontology (social, environmental, and humanistic), human ecology, material culture studies, reminiscence studies, cultural studies, and consumer studies. Once I began data analysis, I also turned to Canadian women's history studies to inform my interpretation of participants' experiences.

Data Collection

In this inquiry, I wished to record, study, and interpret how specific older women perceived their relationships with special things relative to broad contexts of time and society. Through descriptive data, I decided that I would be able to study participants' perceptions of their relationships with the things that they identified as special. Accordingly, I chose a relatively unstructured interview approach to learn what individuals think and feel about their relationships with special things. I conducted two interviews with each of five participants. The first interviews lasted one-and-a-half to two hours; the second, follow-up interviews ranged from three-quarters of an hour to an hour and a half (one exception: two hours, with the interviewee's permission).

In this next section, I describe part of my recruitment and interview process. [For additional information about my sample and recruitment method, please see Paper Three.] I recruited women who are 75 years and older because they, as members of "deep old age" (Blaikie, 1999, p. 22; Twigg, 2004, p. 64) in Western society, have received less research attention than individuals who are younger than 75 years. Women in deep old age have been the 'other', at a stage of life that is often constructed as one of physical and cognitive decline and social withdrawal (Twigg, 2004). I anticipated that they would likely be widowed and/or experiencing some frailty or home downsizing [Connidis, 2001, pp. 21(Table 2.1), 73, 154]. I

wished to interview women who were reflecting on their aging and sense of self as they engaged these changes.

I approached potential participants by telephone and/or e-mail explaining that I wished to study individuals' relationships with their special objects, as people grow older. I began the first interviews inviting participants to tell me about their special things. In all cases, participants had been thinking about their special things prior to the interviews; yet, none of the participants had brought the things from their display places or out of storage. However, as participants talked, they brought things out or showed them to me on walls, shelves, or elsewhere. I asked how these things are important to participants in their later lives. I asked them to consider how they might feel if special things were lost or taken from them. Participants directed the interviews in terms of identifying what things were special to them and then speaking about them. As participants appeared to approach the end of what they wished to say, I asked if they wished to add anything more about any one object or about what they had said overall. In follow-up interviews, I asked for clarification about special things that seemed particularly important to participants. As I began to analyse the data while still conducting interviews, I asked participants about their hopes for their special things.

Of note, while two interviews with each of five participants served as the body of data, I did interview a sixth woman. Having obtained informed consent, I began the interview; however, I quickly perceived that

she was uncomfortable discussing her life experiences and her relationships with special things. I began to feel that my interest was intrusive. As a result, I shifted from an interviewing role to a casual mode of conversation with her. I did not transcribe the audiotape or analyse the transcript.

The interviews were recorded on audiotape with participants' informed consent. I transcribed the data verbatim. All identifying names were replaced with pseudonyms in the transcripts. The pseudonyms appear in the dissertation and will be used in subsequent reports, including presentations, written analyses, and publications. During the interviews, I took handwritten notes of participants' key words and of the ways they handled their special things. After each interview, I described on paper the interview setting and, if known, the location of participants' special things. I noted if and how participants responded emotionally during the interviews. In a few instances, participants became teary when recalling a family member who had died and who was associated with a special thing. I sought to reflect emotion in the transcripts noting teary-ness, voice inflections, and changes in tone. Italics indicate words that participants emphasized. I included these notes in the transcripts at the beginning and when participants referred to the objects. In addition to my visual observation notes, I also maintained a journal of my reflections on the data collection and analysis, noting ideas, hunches, and interpretations. I began this journal on the day of the first interview with the first participant.

To pursue my research question (How do relationships with special things contribute to individuals' sense of self and of their aging?), I sought to study how objects have already played a role in participants' meaning-making. However, I am aware that, in the process of interviewing participants, my questions appeared to prompt new meaning-making by participants. For example, over two interviews, Muriel demonstrated concern for the future of some of her and her family's special things. Near the end of the second interview, she stated that as a result of the interviews she had decided to record on paper the meaning that she has for these things. She appeared to feel reassured that this information would then accompany the things particularly if they are dispersed beyond her family. While Irene stated that she had long been considering moving her hope chest out of a closet and into her bedroom, I wondered if the interviews were indirectly influencing her to take this action.

By asking participants questions, I likely contributed to participants' meaning-making (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Guba, 1990). I recognize that the data are influenced in part by participants' perceptions of me and of my interests in them (Wallace, 1992). However, I also assume that understanding is being (Palmer, 1969, p. 46-48), and that my presence is integral to understanding. I realize that I am a thirty-something researcher interpreting older adults' experiences with their special things. I need to be aware of this difference in life course position and cohort as I interpret the data (Woodward, 1986). In addition, I have sought to be aware of my

human ecological value orientation and of my personal values and assumptions (Allen, 2000).

While relationships with special things were the focus of the interviews, I found that I learned a great deal about the participants and their lives. In describing special things, participants shared stories about themselves and others who were connected with the objects. I believe that this demonstrates how people and objects may be so highly interdependent as to be integrated. To tell me about special things, participants appeared to need to tell me about the meaning that is woven between themselves and the things. Through this sharing of life experiences, I became aware of the underlying tension with which participants were grappling: cherishing things even though they believed that they should not do so.

Data Analysis

My analysis is based on: (a) participants' descriptions of their special things and of their relationships with them, and (b) my observations of participants' interactions with their things. The data analysis was conducted using interpretive description (Thorne, Reimer Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997; Thorne et al., 2004) as a point of reference. This is one type of "generic qualitative research" (Caelli et al., 2003, p. 4) that has been developed in recent years. An interpretive descriptive approach "...provides direction in the creation of an interpretive account that is generated on the basis of informed questioning, using techniques of reflective, critical examination, and which will ultimately guide and inform

disciplinary thought in some manner" (Thorne et al., 2004, p. 6). In keeping with an interpretive descriptive approach, I have sought to contribute to materialist theorizing based on my findings. I took a dialectical approach by employing the lens, studying the data, revisiting the lens, returning to the data, and so on. I sought to be reflexive, considering how my advance work, interview questions, and methodological position influenced my interpretations.

Working from the transcripts, I studied each interview, looking for dominant and secondary themes and patterns in each interview and across the interviews. I looked for commonalities and variations across the participants' experiences. Asking why themes and patterns arose where they did in the data, I considered what they meant. I looked for possible links across the data and also for exceptions to emerging patterns (e.g., Irene destroying letters and cards). I sought to determine what dynamics, tensions, and dilemmas existed in the data.

Applying the key assumptions of a materialist lens, I analysed the data with an eye to the physical objects and relationships between participants and things. I asked about the overall picture. As I abstracted themes and considered what I was learning, my preliminary interpretations informed my revisiting of the lens. When I first applied the lens, I assumed that subject and object were interdependent. However, the data suggested that this interdependence could be at such a high level that "integration"

(Gwen) might be a more appropriate term to use in some cases. I returned to the data applying this concept of integration.

Through this dialectical process, I began to answer my research question: How do relationships with special things contribute to individuals' sense of self and of their aging? The physical presence of a few special things appears to be critical to meaning-making because participants, these objects, and the meaning that they make together are integrated. Without one part of this three-way relationship, loss occurs, including a perceived partial loss of self. I have studied the person-object relationships relative to: participants' concerns for the future of their special things; unexpected losses of special things; and, a determination to keep a few special things amid anti-materialist sentiments. I believe that I have addressed all of the data.

By ensuring that the data collection and analytic methods are consistent with my conceptual framework and methodological position (Caelli et al., 2003), I have sought to make my work rigorous. The theme and sub-themes in my data support my finding: For the purpose of making meaning around their sense of self and their aging, these members of the current generation of older women (75+ years) in western Canada appear to need to keep a few special things physically close to them until they die (either in storage or openly displayed in their homes). I have sought to understand the underlying meaning that is the context for this finding (Caelli et al., 2003; Thorne et al., 2004): Aging well is physically situated.

As an exploratory and qualitative inquiry, these empirical findings are not meant to be generalized to all older women or to women who are 75 years and older and living in western Canada. The lives and experiences of older women are diverse. What this inquiry is intended to do is: (a) to build on past work, which has suggested that gender and age are critical to understanding relationships with special things (Cram & Paton, 1993; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981, pp. 89-113; Rubinstein, 1987), and (b) to begin to provide some materialist insight into the study of aging well.

My work informs aging-well research through enhanced understanding of the interdependence between older adults and physical contexts that may be critical to later-life meaning-making. The specifics of this interdependence and of the older adults and contexts involved presumably will influence how this interdependence, and possibly integration, occurs. Further research is required particularly in terms of later-life diversity across age, socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, and living arrangements.

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