

“The Internal Police Officer Has Not Retired but Has Slowed Down”: Israeli Women Reframe Their Aging Experiences in the Second Half of Life

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Liat Ayalon¹  and Shlomit Aharoni Lir¹

Abstract

Compared with gains, losses have received a substantial amount of research and public attention. The present study aims to shed light on the positive gains associated with older age from the perspective of older women. Five focus groups with 19 Israeli women over the age of 54 were conducted. Trailers of three different films were used to stimulate discussion about old age and aging and allow for reflections on societal norms in light of personal experiences. Focus group interviews were analyzed thematically. Respondents identified four contexts, characterized by reframing their experiences against societal norms. These included gender stereotypes, physical appearance, interpersonal relations, and employment. This study represents an opening to a different discourse around old age, which is characterized by gains and possibilities brought about by changes in reframing one's experiences, while distancing oneself and exerting free will vis à vis social norms.

Keywords

successful aging, gains, losses, older adults, second half of life, life course

Introduction

The second half of life is characterized as a period of gains and losses (Heckhausen et al., 1989). Among the gains attributed to older age are increased wisdom, emotional stability, and experience, as well as improved functioning on certain cognitive tasks (Kavé & Halamish, 2015; Worthy et al., 2011). On the other hand, possible losses associated with older age may include physical changes in appearance and functioning, increased susceptibility to medical illnesses, losses of friends and/or partner/s, and in some countries, forced retirement from the workforce, which may result in forced separation from social support and reduced social status (Hung et al., 2011; Segel-Karpas et al., 2018). To date, research has primarily emphasized the losses associated with aging and old age, highlighting the loss of independence as an undesired and often inevitable occurrence (Bonaga et al., 2018; Duran-Badillo et al., 2021; Freund & Ebner, 2005). The present study examines the positive gains associated with aging from the perspective of older women.

offers a constructive framework through which to view aging and old age. The term *successful aging* was first used by Havighurst (1963); (Havighurst & Albrecht, 1953) to describe desired activities of older people. Baltes and Baltes (1993) also used the term, stressing processes of selection, optimization, and compensation as a means of achieving successful aging. However, the successful aging model proposed by Rowe and Kahn (1997) has been the most influential. This model suggests that for successful aging, one needs to be physically, mentally, and cognitively intact and to be socially engaged. Although the model has received substantial criticism for missing components such as wellbeing, spirituality, or harmonization and for supposedly blaming older people for not meeting the successful aging standard (Dillaway & Byrnes, 2009; Katz & Calasanti, 2014; Liang & Luo, 2012), it remains the most dominant. The model does not point to gains associated with old age, but rather states what losses do not occur. Hence,

Gains in the Second Half of Life

The successful aging paradigm represents an opportunity to put a positive spin on older age. Supposedly, this paradigm

¹Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, Bar Ilan University, Israel

Corresponding Author:

Liat Ayalon, Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan 52900, Israel.

Email: liat.ayalon@biu.ac.il

the model mainly highlights the absence of age-related losses (Katz & Calasanti, 2014).

The socioemotional selectivity theory offers another opportunity to view old age positively. This is a lifespan theory, which stresses positive emotional developments that come with old age. Specifically, the theory proposes that as the perception of future time becomes narrower, individuals are more likely to focus on emotional goals and to prioritize intimate ties. Moreover, older people in particular are more likely to attend to and to remember positive rather than negative experiences (Carstensen, 1992; Carstensen et al., 2003).

Wisdom too is thought to be an advantageous characteristic of old age. Wisdom is broadly defined as gained experience, life knowledge, and improved judgment (Ardelt & Jeste, 2018). Although the general view is that wisdom increases with age, this claim has been contested in different studies, and the relationship between older age and wisdom remains equivocal (Staudinger, 1999; Sternberg, 2005).

Losses in the Second Half of Life

In general, people of all age groups wish to remain independent in their mind and body for as long as they possibly can (Dow et al., 2013; Roy et al., 2018). In old age, issues associated with independence versus dependence receive prominence in the light of possible losses and threats to one's independence (Toledano-González et al., 2019). Increased physical disability and chronic illness in old age often reduce older people's independence (Bleijenberg et al., 2017). Pathological cognitive changes associated with aging, such as dementia, also may result in reduced independence (Wahl et al., 2019).

Physical changes in appearance also occur over time and at least in Western countries may be viewed as a loss, especially in the case of women (Clarke & Griffin, 2008). Research has shown that physical changes in appearance are of particular concern for women, as their status often is associated with their looks (Clarke, 2002; Ebner et al., 2018). Past accounts of women in the age range of 50–70 have shown that they have engaged in beauty work throughout their lives (Clarke & Griffin, 2008). The fight to maintain one's youthful and thus attractive appearance was described as ongoing. Women attributed this engagement in beauty work to a variety of reasons, which can be summarized as a wish to stay visible in society (Clarke & Griffin, 2008). Hence, the internalization of negative messages about older people may increase one's dependence on anti-aging products and the cosmetic industry in order to postpone and hide visible signs of aging for as long as possible (Calasanti et al., 2016).

Ageism, manifested in the way we think, feel, and act toward people because of their age, also prevents people from fulfilling their potential (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2017) and has shown to be particularly deleterious for older people (Chang et al., 2020). Older people's views of their aging as well as societal views of older people and responses toward them may represent barriers to older people's ability to age independently (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2017). Older people

who think of their aging process negatively are more likely to experience negative outcomes, including increased morbidity, decreased physical functioning, poorer cognitive functioning, and mortality (Ayalon, 2016; Levy & Myers, 2004; Levy et al., 2002; Sargent-Cox et al., 2012). Similarly, various regulations, including forced retirement age or physicians' discriminatory attitudes and practices may reduce older people's autonomy (Band-Winterstein, 2015; Ben-Harush et al., 2017; Tougas et al., 2004).

The Present Study

Our study is largely focused on Israeli older women's perceptions of old age and aging, with a particular emphasis on gains perceived in the second half of life. Our choice to exclusively focus on women was fueled by the fact that gender is an important social category that affects one's aging process. Older women are more likely to live longer but to experience multiple chronic conditions, including cognitive decline and disability (Schünemann et al., 2017). Moreover, for some women, changes in appearance are thought to represent a particular concern, as much of their self-esteem is determined by their physical appearance (Clarke & Griffin, 2008). In addition, the intersection between ageism and sexism appears to be particularly pronounced, exposing women to a double jeopardy due to their older age and gender (McGann et al., 2016). By focusing on the gains, rather than merely stating the losses associated with older age, the present study points to opportunities and possibilities for changing the societal discourse around old age in the second half of life.

Methods

The Sample

The study was approved by the ethics committee of the PI's university (#082003), and all participants received detailed information about the study and provided verbal informed consent prior to participating in the study. The informed consent procedure was recorded. Inclusion criteria were women over the age of 50 (e.g., the second half of life), who speak Hebrew, and are able to use Zoom. Respondents were invited to discuss Israeli and international films from the perspective of time and gender and to examine how these issues are reflected in films and in real life. The invitation specifically targeted cinema lovers. Respondents were recruited via word of mouth using a variety of modalities, including posting on social media networks and collaborating with an advertising agency. In total, 19 women participated in five focus groups. Their ages ranged between 54 and 76, with an average age of 68. Four of the women had undergraduate education and the remaining had graduate education. Three were divorced, three were widows, and the rest were married. See [Supplement](#) for study procedure and analysis.

The Procedure

Five focus groups were conducted over Zoom during October–November 2020. Each group lasted 75 minutes. We relied on three short segments of movies to evoke participants' responses to old age and aging. The three movies were *Tatie Danielle* (1990, Étienne Chatiliez), *The Intern* (2015, Nancy Meyers) and *Love in Suspenders* (2019, Yohanan Weller). A detailed description of the three movies as presented in their official advertisements is available below.

Interview Guide

The focus groups were administered like a funnel, starting with broad questions about the role of cinema in the participants' lives, changes in attitudes toward cinema over time, and certain movies that had an impact on participants' lives. Subsequently, participants were asked about the image they have of older people and possible gender differences that they had noticed. Next, the trailer of *Tatie Danielle* was played. Respondents were asked about their response to the clip. Respondents also were asked about how this clip challenges the norms about older women and whether the clip is seen as empowering women. Following the group discussion, respondents saw the advertisement for the movie *The Intern*. They were asked about their reaction to the visual image, about their perceptions of retirement as a positive/negative experience, and about the ability of older people to pursue employment in old age and the perceived added value of employing older people in the workforce.

Next, respondents were asked whether they think love has an expiration age and why. Barriers to love in old age and perceived gender differences in pursuing love in old age were discussed. After watching the clip *Love in Suspenders*, respondents were asked about their impression, followed by a question about the importance of physical appearance in old age and the perceived power that women have in old age.

Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017), using an open-coding approach. The first author read and re-read each of the focus group interviews, familiarizing herself with the data. She initially assigned descriptive codes to each of the thematic segments. This was followed by constant comparisons between segments within each focus group interview and across interviews (Boeije, 2002). This was done to identify themes in the interview data. In parallel, the second author familiarized herself with the interviews and categorized them based on participants' responses to each of the interview questions, which remained constant across groups. She also noted major thematic categories that repeated across focus group interviews. Following a discussion between the authors and a review of the themes, a main theme representing a common thread across all five focus groups was identified, and

subthemes that corresponded with this overall theme were selected. Additional themes, such as the stereotypic depiction of old age in the movies or dating during the pandemic were omitted from this paper, as their inclusion does not represent a coherent storyline. Consensus was established through constant discussions between the authors. We also maintained an audit trail, documenting all stages of analysis. Thick descriptions are provided to allow the reader to judge the interpretation of the findings.

Findings

Although all respondents reported fears associated with foreseen limitations due to physical deterioration, an overarching theme identified across interviews was that of changes in reframing one's experiences as positive, while distancing oneself and exerting free will vis à vis social norms. This overarching theme was classified along four different domains, gender stereotypes, physical appearance, interpersonal relations, and employment. Below is a detailed account of the respondents' views, accompanied by direct quotes from the text, using pseudonyms.

Reframing Gender Stereotypes

Although respondents were quite aware of gender stereotypes, they were able to note changes in societal norms that allow for greater gender equality. Moreover, even though some reported the presence of gender stereotypes in their lives, they were optimistic about the prospects of future generations and their ability to reframe gender roles in a more balanced fashion. This is illustrated by the following statement made by Nena, a 74-year-old, married woman:

I think that we live in a generation in which the masculine and feminine socializations are very different, a more conservative society. I can see the younger generation aging differently and loving differently from what I see today, when you still see gender roles.

Hence, although this participant was fully aware of gender norms in her social milieu, she was optimistic about the future and appreciated the fact that gender norms were slowly changing, thus possibly impacting the aging process of future generations.

Ira, a 64-year-old woman, added the following:

True, we know there are differences between men and women, but what I feel is that in older age, we are somewhat more balanced in the things we wish to do. I think that once we retire, we all look for things we can do. How we will have fun, how we will travel.

Hence, she suggests greater gender equality in the second half of life.

A participant in a different focus group stated:

I think that with time, I see many times that once men become grandparents, this is when men become less occupied. And they find a lot of interest in play, in collaborative building, in mutual walks. All the things they never had time for when they were younger. So I do think that age makes a difference here.

According to her, the work-family balance changes in old age, and men allow themselves to invest in their grandchildren in ways that are substantially different from their level of involvement with their children.

Reframing Changes in Appearance

All women acknowledged the fact that they care deeply about their looks. They all acknowledged age-related changes in their appearance, which they perceived as undesirable. Nonetheless, in their discussion, they also were able to reframe these changes as an opportunity to gain control over their appearance vis à vis societal norms.

Ellena (74 years old, married) stated:

I think we always care. Up until the last minute. We care—both men and women. We mourn our wrinkles. Not the white hair, by the way, but the wrinkles. I am sure that even my boys, who tend to be bald headed from the age of 45 are not having an easy time with this. I am sure, even though they do not speak. Men for sure do not talk about this. Both men and women are very aware. Very much care, are hurt over their belly and their baldness. Our physical existence bothers us in multiple ways up until the last moment.

Although the women acknowledged changes in their physical appearance and the impact it has on them, some reported being able to move away from social norms and to accept themselves despite these changes. Sarah (age 63) said:

I think that you always wish to look well. You first have to come to terms with the fact that you do not look at the age of 60 or 70 as you looked when you were 20 or 30. Once you get this, it takes time to internalize this, but once you do ...

Hence, she reported an internal process that helped her to come to terms with her physical changes.

Johana (74 years old, married) reflected on the personal changes she had gone through that also resulted in physical changes:

It depends on what we have internalized. If we, from a certain age, internalized that if we are not beautiful, we will not succeed. We will not succeed in catching a husband, will not succeed in finding a job. If we internalized this, it will have a stronger impact on us. If we received messages that say: it is not only the body and the beauty, but other things, then we, I think, will deal

differently with changes that take place. I think this is cultural ... I, only three years ago, decided to stop dyeing my hair because what is this fakeness? And I was shocked by the responses of "What a brave woman you are!" The use of the term brave ... brave means doing something that is not normative. It is expected of me that I would wish to hide. So yes, there is a lot of socialization ... I can write a book about the responses I received. You hear about all the fears and the difficulties and the need to please. Amazing. Just for this it was worth not dyeing my hair.

Hence, she, like others in the group and in other focus groups, was able to report a disconnect from societal norms and to reframe aging as an opportunity to listen to her own inner self.

Reframing Social Relationships

Respondents reported changes in their interpersonal relationships due to an empty nest and/or the loss of one's partner. These changes were reframed as an opportunity, as "releasing" women from past commitments and social norms. The women reported experiencing increased self-confidence, which allowed them to be less concerned about social norms and more tuned to their own inner self.

Some of the women interviewed in this study argued that their own personal losses opened them up to new personal and social opportunities. These allowed them to exert their free will in their relationships and also afforded them freedom from unsatisfactory relationships. Ruth, a 75-year-old widow, stated:

From my personal experience. I became a widow at a very young age, and it has taken me many years and (now) I have partnership. But I feel very independent. Not lonely even when alone. I have no difficulty. And I have not searched obsessively and I have not felt miserable because I was alone. I think there are many advantages to being alone and there are advantages to being older.

Other women discussed the opportunities that come with increased self-confidence and self-awareness:

I think the short trailer we saw (*Tatie Danielle*) illustrates the great diversity. Why would you even assume that women must look in a certain way or behave in a certain way. I am having a hard time with this discussion. I think that every woman can be whatever she wants, especially if she overcomes the expectations of society that she has to be one way and not another.

Olga, a 74-year-old married woman, discussed the increased freedom which is manifested in the work-family balance:

There are women who invest a lot in their career. There are women who say, I do not want to replace the babysitter. But in terms of building a relationship between grandmother and

grandchildren, with contents of friendship, mutual investment, entertainment, a relationship that is unique and different from the relationship between parents and children—I do think that age makes a difference.

Hence, she suggests that the ability to establish relationships with family members and grandchildren is improved in the second half of life.

Reframing Work and Retirement

In the public sector, Israeli men over the age of 67 and women over the age of 62 are expected to retire from work. Although participants acknowledged a sense of loss that comes with forced retirement, many were able to reframe forced retirement as an advantage, allowing them freedom for the first time in their lives.

Ella (74 year-old, married) clearly identified the negative aspects of forced retirement:

Modern society is doing an injustice to older people. It throws them away because it states that at the age of 67 or 68 people must leave work and it doesn't matter what they can contribute. In an arbitrary way, a very discriminatory way.

Hence, she views forced retirement as discrimination based on age.

Bina (72 years old, widower) also viewed retirement negatively, but was able to use positive terms in conjunction with the losses associated with it:

The only freedom that I can talk about is freedom from work. I wouldn't define it as freedom. There are changes in life, but to do what I feel like, I did long before, and what people thought of me, I didn't care even before.

Bina, she stresses the ability to disconnect from societal norms as an advantage.

Rona (72 years old, married) also provides a similar account of contentment and a new, unexpected sense of joy associated with retirement:

Personally, this is a period of life that I enjoy a lot. It is good for me. I see there are many options for interesting activities related to work, unrelated to work. Freedom that I didn't have before. Socially, I think there are many stereotypes and problems related to attitudes toward older people. But I think this is the age we start enjoying life. Even my daughters are jealous of me. They say, "Mom, you are having a better time than us." They work and we are having fun.

Discussion

The second half of life has long been characterized as a period of gains and losses (Heckhausen et al., 1989). Nevertheless,

lay people and researchers alike have given substantially more attention to losses associated with old age. In contrast, this study highlights the opportunities associated with old age that are gained through women's ability to reframe their aging experiences. When reviewing the findings, it is important to acknowledge that all the women were fully aware of various losses and societal constraints that controlled their entire life. Yet, they all were able to identify personal changes that have allowed them to reframe the second half of life as a period of freedom and possibilities, despite constraints put forth by society and their own changing body and health.

The women identified changes in social norms related to gender relations and gender roles. Although the women interviewed in this study still perceive gender imbalances in society and strict gender norms, they also were able to point to areas of change in society at large. However, this also was attributed to personal growth and development that better allow older people to prioritize their life tasks and obtain a better work-family balance. Specifically, men were viewed as free to allow softer, more family-oriented parts of their personality to manifest, while disconnecting from societal norms that view men as providers rather than as caretakers. This finding is consistent with theoretical arguments that have stressed gender role reversal in late life (Sinnott & Shifren, 2001). The present study adds by associating these changes with societal changes, which correspond to personal development changes.

Women were able to move away from more traditional gender stereotypes, which emphasize their physical looks and attractiveness (Clarke & Griffin, 2008) and to better connect with their inner self. Although, like past research, all women attributed great importance to their physical looks and all viewed physical changes in their appearance with a critical eye, some managed to "free" themselves from the internal, critical "police officer," as phrased by one of the interviewees. The women stressed the fact that societal influence has decreased, and they have learned to come to terms with the changes and even appreciate the freedom this has given them. Hence, they were able to reframe changes in their appearance as an opportunity. Our findings are consistent with past research, which has demonstrated the varied ways in which women can negotiate gender norms concerning their appearance (Winterich, 2007).

Changes in interpersonal relations that have taken place over the women's life course also were reframed as an opportunity. Specifically, women were able to reframe these changes as an opportunity to break away from societal constraints and norms and better listen to their own inner selves. Some of the women reported an increased sense of self-confidence, which allowed them to be who they wanted to be without attempting to please or satisfy others. Moreover, those women who had lost their spouse after a long period of illness reframed the loss and the empty nest as an advantage, which freed them from the need to care and provide for their loved ones. This finding is consistent with past research,

which has shown that in addition to mourning and a sense of loss, the death of one's spouse may represent a relief from caregiving duties (Keene & Prokos, 2008).

Mandatory retirement age was identified as an ageist, discriminatory policy that forces women (and men) to identify other outlets for their energy, creativity, and experience. Although the women viewed mandatory retirement as a discriminatory policy, they also were able to view the free time that accompanies retirement as an opportunity to explore and recharge, while listening, for the first time, to their own voice. This finding corresponds with past research, which has shown that at least some older people are capable of viewing retirement as a period of opportunity and renewal (Eismann et al., 2019).

Implications

The socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 2003) points to the positive spin older people put on life events, following the realization that their time in the world is running out. Our findings indicate that indeed, the women were able to reframe life changes in a positive light. This reframing has helped them to regain perceived control over uncontrolled life events. The present findings contrast, however, the traditional successful aging model proposed by Rowe and Kahn (1997), as they highlight the importance of subjective reframing, rather than objective life events.

In reviewing these findings, it is important to acknowledge the fact that all women were fully aware of societal constraints and acted according to these constraints to some degree. Ageist and sexist stereotypes about what an older woman should or should not do or look like were highly prevalent and penetrated the mindset of the women interviewed, and they had to rely on their past experiences and self-confidence in order not to succumb to these stereotypes. Unsurprisingly, concrete fears about future physical losses that come with age were highly evident in respondents' reports. Hence, even though they were able to reframe some of their experiences in a positive light and to identify their ability to disconnect from societal norms as an advantage, they were all fully aware that this was a conditional opportunity, highly dependent on their physical health. It is also important to note the fact that our sample was relatively young, with an average age of 68, and thus possibly did not experience many of the illnesses and physical ailments that tend to accompany older age. Moreover, our sample was highly educated. Many of the reframed opportunities and gains identified by these women are not shared by women of lower socioeconomic status (English et al., 2019; Steptoe & Zaninotto, 2020). Future research will benefit from exploring the views of different groups in society on old age and aging. Nevertheless, our findings point to the second half of life as a potential period of gains, characterized by a growing disconnect from societal constraints. The older women in this study reported going through social and personal changes, which have resulted in a

better connection with their inner self and a relative disconnect from societal constraints. This represents an opening to a different discourse around old age, characterized by gains and possibilities rather than losses. It is possible to use these lessons about the importance of reframing one's experiences to assist wo(men) throughout their lives. It may be desirable to assist wo(men) of all age groups to better tune into their own preferences and needs, rather than to societal constraints.

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Ethical Approval

The study was approved by the ethics committee of Bar Ilan University #082003.

Informed Consent

We complied with HIPPA requirements. A verbal informed consent was provided.

ORCID iD

Liat Ayalon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3339-7879>

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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