

Exploring Play and Playfulness in the Everyday Lives of Older Women.

by

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### **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## **Abstract**

There is an emerging body of literature about older women and play, often focused on social groupings (e.g., Red Hats Society, Raging Grannies). This study aimed to contribute to this body of literature by exploring the meaning, experience, and place of play and playfulness in the day-to-day lives of older women. Interpreting older women's play as a phenomenologist informed by the feminist gerontology literature, I explored, described, and interpreted play using the voices, words, lived experiences, and artful reflections of four focus groups comprised of nineteen women between the ages of 63 to 95 years. Play emerged to be a wonderful, complex, and paradoxical phenomenon for older women that interconnected in three ways: as a doing, a feeling, and a being. Within and across the women, play was characterized by these paradoxes: time flies by and time slows down, productive and unproductive, social and solitary, and serious and silly. Play was infused into the everyday lives of these older women. Arts-based methods served to invigorate and engage the women and me, and transformed the research environment into a comfortable, open space to play and be playful, and to share, gather, and build knowledge. Thus this research contributes to the growing body of literature about the lives and experiences of older women, from their perspective, adds insight into older women's play, and grows our knowledge about collecting data through arts-based methods with older women.

*Keywords:* play, playfulness, older women, phenomenology, arts-based methods, gendered research, ageing, ageism

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I bow before the supervisor, leisure programs – senior services, from the municipality I worked with. Helping me recruit the women for this was challenging. The supervisor's sense of humour, creativity, and perseverance in the face of no volunteers—and beyond—was inspiring!

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## Chapter One: Let's Play!

### Reflections

#### **Play: A legacy from Mom.**

*Italian Night at the Knights of Columbus hall. The house is full—an animated crowd of nearly three hundred people—I hear talking, laughing and merrymaking all around. The tables are piled high with delicious food: spaghetti and meatballs, roasted chicken, and crusty rolls. A hush rolls over the crowd as a “man” makes his way through noisily pushing a fruit wagon, “Fruita for sale! Buona sera, bella donna, signore! Come stai? Fruita for sale.” he sings. As a teenager waiting on tables, I cringe and glow at the same time. This fifty-something “man” is my Mother! Mrs. Alfano, Mrs. Kelly, Mrs. O’Reilly, Mrs. Armstrong, and my Mom—women between fifty-five and sixty five have spent the last month rehearsing in our basement—singing, dancing, writing, and always laughing. The show is about to begin—let the fun continue!*

My Mother was the consummate player. “She sang and danced her way through life”—that is how we described Mom in her obituary when she died at 86 in 2007. She made our home a place of fun, joy, and laughter—we played all kinds of games, from charades to cards, her playful nature was always tuned in. Renown for her colourful personality and joie de vie, her comedic performances at Knights of Columbus and parish parties were legendary. She sang in the church choir for fifty years. For half a century her women’s card club gang sustained each other through the births and deaths of children and spouses, illnesses, and the ups and downs of lives well lived. My Mom was my inspiration for this study.

#### **The meaning, experience, and place of play and playfulness in my life.**

I never really gave much thought to play. Play is something I have always done; it’s in my nature. It’s the legacy of my Mom, family, and friends. From kick-the-can, to frozen

statues, back in the 1960's Longfellow Avenue was the neighbourhood kids' playground. My play continued into elementary school and university through sports, games, and friendships. Play persisted into my career where my presentations and working style were known for silliness and creativity. As a mom, I relish playing with our children and being playful is a strength of my parenting style. Friends and family vacillate between dread and delight to our dinner table games, also known as tests of wit. My summers are filled with play at the cottage and since turning fifty, golf has entered my play world with a vengeance!

When I think of play, I am transported into a realm of joy, fun, lightness, and creativity. When I play, I feel expanded, a part of something bigger, connected. In my body, I feel light, and open and free. Time disappears when I am playing, and I am fully in the now. I express play in my life through a playful attitude—I am spontaneous, creative, and always looking for fun.

My bias towards play is unabashedly positive. Play invites me to experience my emotions, be joyful, to nurture, and to be bold and empowered. It helps me discover and express who I am and gives me meaning. I savour play in silence, express it aloud, and share play in communion with friends and family. Play makes me a better, more joyful, healthier person. It is with these thoughts in mind that I embarked on this project. They have shaped how I got here and influenced my understanding as I engaged with the women in my study.

## **Play**

Some argue play is a means of not only living well but expressing our humanity, yet it is devalued as we age (e.g., Brown, 2009; Cohen, 1993; Snyder, Lopez, Pedrotti, 2011; Yarnal, 2006). Play is often decried as frivolous or inappropriate for adults (Brown, 2009). Sutton-Smith (1997) identified frivolity as one of his seven rhetorics of play, yet even he conceded play

is often thought of as merely a diversion for adults. Cohen (1993) said, “[y]ou can’t just laugh – or play – for the fun of it. Truth has to be more somber. ... Who can justify studying play unless it indicates hidden depths?” (p. 16).

The study of play in psychology, physiology, and biology often begins with pondering the function of play, as opposed to comprehending play for its own sake, or for the sake of individuals and culture (Huizinga, 1955). Lieberman (1977) identified that traditional thinking was guided by the idea that play is, at best, an inconsequential activity. As a result, most of the scholarly study of play has focused on children, the function of play, and finding justification for play (Lieberman, 1977; Pelligrini, 2011). Studying the intrinsic value of play was viewed as not worthy of study.

Play is studied primarily through children (L’Abate, 2009; Pelligrini, 2011; Yarnal, 2006). Until recently, adult play, more specifically, older women and play, have been largely ignored in the literature (Yarnal, 2006).

### **Older Women and Play**

The importance of finding ways to live well—to thrive—into old age is essential given the demographic shifts to our population in Canada (Dupuis, 2008). According to Statistics Canada (2010), by the year 2036, people aged 65 and over will represent 23.7% of our population compared to only 14.4% in 2011. Given longer life expectancies, women account for 55.5% of the population over 65. In fact, one in four women in Canada will be over 65 by that same year (Statistics Canada, 2010). Dionigi (2006) suggested our changing society and demographics require us to have a deeper understanding of the beliefs and needs of older people.

Researchers urge us to listen to and involve older people in the development of theory and policy (e.g., Angus & Reeve, 2006; Russell, 2007). Holstein and Minkler (2003) contended

that we need to give “greater attention to qualitative research methods that give voice to older women’s views of a good old age” (p. 794).

Play through our leisure engagements might be an important means to live well in later life. Der Ananian and Janke (2010) identified that finding ways to engage older adults in meaningful (to them) leisure (dare I extrapolate to play?) is important. Dupuis (2008) called for research on ageing and leisure activities not only focused on physical activity and fitness but on the range of things we do in later life. Wearing (1998) called for future leisure research in imaginative spaces (e.g., spirituality, literature, art, music, theatre, story-telling, and humour).

There is a body of literature emerging on older women’s play through social groups, particularly the Red Hats Society, and to a lesser extent the Raging Grannies and other social groups. Examined in detail later in the thesis (chapter two), this literature is beginning to demonstrate the personal and broader societal impacts these playful social groups have. I hope my thesis contributes to the adult play literature, particularly outside the context of organized social groups.

I believe there is an opportunity to shine a light on play as one way to help us live well—thrive—as we age. Cohen (1993) called for us as researchers to broaden our perspective of play, including a call to study play throughout people’s lives. Cohen challenged us to be bold, to play with play. He said,

Yet, we remain rather self-conscious about play. The traditional view that play is something children do cramps our style. I believe psychologists need both to study how adults play....Nothing is sadder, perhaps, than adults with time and leisure on their hands who can’t quite make use of it. We ought to develop our play from womb to tomb. ...There is no way of providing it but it is plausible, at least, that a world in which adults felt freer to play would be a happier and less dangerous one. ....Adults ought to play more. And psychologists ought to play more with play and, paradoxically, that may lead to further deep findings (Cohen, 1993, p. 193).

It was with these thoughts in mind that I initiated this study.

## **Study Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience and meaning of play and playfulness to older women, and its place in their day-to-day lives. The research questions guiding my study included: How do older women experience play? What is the meaning of play for older women? How do they describe it? What is playfulness to older women? How do older women play in their everyday lives? How are they playful in their day-to-day lives? What is the significance of play and playfulness in women's everyday lives and in living well? What aspects of women's lives limit or prevent their access to play?

## **Being Informed by Feminist Gerontology**

Although my study is not feminist gerontology research, it is gendered and has been informed by my reading of the feminist gerontology literature. Calasanti (2009) argued, “[f]eminist gerontology emerged in the 1990s, partly in response to this failure to theorize the relations of inequality that underlie gender differences” (p. 472). Feminist gerontology called me to listen to the voices of older women. Feminist gerontologists take to heart the feminist's need to “recognize the importance of women's lived experiences to the goal of unearthing subjugated knowledge” (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 3) by seeking to explore and understand the lives and experiences of *older* women (my emphasis). Hesse-Biber was unequivocal; we must not assume a homogenized group represents all,

[t]o engage in feminist theory and praxis means to challenge knowledge that excludes, while seeming to include—assuming that when we speak the generic term *men*, we also mean women, as though what is true for the dominant groups must also be true for women and other oppressed groups (2012, p. 3).

Sensitized by the literature, a feminist gerontologist perspective informed this study.

### **My gendered beginnings.**

Until recently, I did not consider myself as a feminist, let alone know there was such a concept as a feminist gerontologist. Feminism did not speak to me; I had flippantly dismissed it—I had not *personally* experienced, witnessed, or cared—*enough*—to call myself a feminist. My resistance was predicated on a narrowly conceived notion of what feminism is, an ignorance and misunderstanding about what feminism could be, and a lack of awareness in all the unseen ways feminism had already touched and shaped me. Shaped in part by the media of the 1960s and 1970s, I had little interest in the radicalized notion of feminism that made the headlines. Now, I realize patriarchal structures largely controlled the media and no doubt shaped those very same headlines. I remember thinking at the time that feminism was a blaming, man-hating, bra burning, radical label that I did not relate to. Feminism seemed at odds with my personal feelings of strong agency, responsibility, and accountability for my own life.

To me, my Mom was a woman who lived life on her terms. She did not call herself a feminist and stayed mostly at home caring for our family. My Mom certainly had a voice, and in a standout example she used it in 1967 to challenge her male doctor's diagnosis (I remember her often quoting his words, "it's nothing to worry about dear") of a lump in her breast. Just 46, she trusted her intuition and sought a second opinion. Diagnosed with cancer, she had a radical mastectomy the next week.

Despite their lack of formal education, my parents nudged me along a path with university and career as my natural, logical progression after high school. As a teenager, I remember putting down my Aunt Margaret's copy of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* almost as quickly as I picked it up. Irrelevant! I would never live in the suburbs! No question a career was in my future!

The context I live in today is one of privilege. I am White, I live in a well-to-do neighbourhood in Toronto, am an educated, career-minded mother. I am a not quite old woman—or am I at 53? As my world expands beyond the day-to-day responsibilities of raising a family, pursuing a career, and earning a living, my eyes are opening and my views of feminism are morphing. Attending graduate school—reading, thinking, and talking about ageing and women and finding feminist gerontology has been life changing. I feel like I am embarking on a mission to challenge ageism, even if only in my world, within my network, my children, and myself.

I am slowly beginning to identify myself as a feminist. There is much for me to read, wonder, and think about as I construct what my newfound feminist identity means. Even now as I read and consider the academic literature, I grapple with some feminist literature and ideas. I need to deepen my understanding of what patriarchy truly means and how it shapes our world. My primary concern is that feminism does not seem to include older women—enough. Sometimes, I sense a righteousness I want to avoid. For example, Reay (2012) wrote “...a feminist vigilance, a sensitive and emotionally attuned reflexivity” (p. 637), as if other researchers or people might not desire or share that same attention.

My conception of feminism seeks a just world for all. My vision of feminism is active, and I seek to influence and change minds. My perspective of feminism aims to understand and question relationships between people, society, and power—how we might be privileged for one reason and disadvantaged for another. As a budding feminist gerontologist, I aim to centre and focus my efforts on older women. I want to listen to and share the voices of older women. In turn, I hope through older women’s experiences, stories, and conceptions of ageing I am able to



inspire change in my personal world. Feminist gerontology has led me to recognize myself as a feminist and is helping to shape my newfound identity.

### **Understanding feminism.**

Feminism contains a spectrum of meanings (e.g., Browne, 1998; Henderson et al., 1996) yet is commonly rooted in the belief that women's lives are important and equal to men (Hesse-Biber, 2012). DeVault and Gross' (2012) definition of feminism as "a set of practices and perspectives that affirms differences among women and promotes women's interests, health, and safety, locally and abroad. .... [a] diverse and differentiated social and scholarly movement, .... promot[ing] justice and the well-being of all women" resonates with me (2012, p. 207). As a philosophy, social movement, and practice, feminism "seeks to eliminate the invisibility and distortion of women's experiences" (Henderson et al., 1996, p. 13).

There are many different types of feminists, but "all recognize the importance of women's lived experiences to the goal of unearthing subjugated knowledge" (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p 3). Feminists seek to empower women, and "[t]hey advocate for equity and justice and for women (and all people) to have control over their lives" (Henderson et al., 2012, p. 20). Most feminists share three foundational goals:

1. the correction of both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to social change
  2. the right of every woman to equity, dignity, and freedom of choice through the power to control her own life and body within and outside the home
  3. the removal of all forms of inequality and oppression in society
- (Henderson et al., 1996, p. 74).

Feminists' orientation is to act. Feminists seek social transformation and change on behalf of women and others and intentionally operate to change the structures of oppression for all people (Hesse-Biber, 2012). It is in this listening to the personal stories of people that

feminists build knowledge and are inspired to call for and inspire social change (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

Feminist research is mindful of the power hierarchy – by the questions we ask and the methodologies and methods we employ (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Feminist researchers emphasize the “importance of taking issues of power, authority, ethics, and reflexivity into the practice of social research” (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 17).

Feminist research requires a strong reflexive practice (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Reay, 2012). The details of how I approached reflexivity for my study are outlined in the Chapter 3. Integrating a feminist perspective has been a challenge for me throughout this study, not only understanding it, but I also grappled with how to represent the experiences of women who may or may not share my feminist perspective (Andrews, 2002). Indeed feminism never explicitly came up in my focus groups, the women both took for granted *and* challenged traditional work, play, and care in their lives. Indeed, Reay offered sage advice, we need to avoid, “the seductions of ‘knowing better’ rather than ‘knowing differently’” (2012, p. 632).

Feminists have tended to ignore ageing women and failed to account for ageing in women’s lives (e.g., Browne, 1998; Calasanti, Slevin, & King, 2006; Maynard, Afshar, Franks, & Wray, 2008; Mitchell & Bruns, 2011; Pearsall, 1997; Reinharz, 1992b; Silver, 2003), yet, all older women face a double marginality: ageism and sexism (Arber & Ginn, 1991; Sontag 1997). Of course, many older women face additional challenges through, for instance, racism, classism, or sexual discrimination (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

Feminist gerontology was an important perspective for my study because it aims to increase awareness about and improve the lives of older women through individual empowerment and advocacy for change (Garner, 1999). Being informed by feminist

gerontology, I sought to see older women as they see themselves, not through the dominant youth oriented view of our culture. Seeking to recognize, respect, and respond to the differences older women experience (Reay, 2012), a feminist gerontology perspective required me to be aware of and seek the differences older women experience in their lives.

An implication of considering feminist gerontology in my study was the call to look for ways to create change for older women. Feminists seek to improve the lives of all women through empowerment, education, social consciousness raising, solidarity, and inclusion (e.g., Brown, 1998; McCandless & Conner, 1999; Reinharz, 1992a). Feminists create social change through theory and practice and aim to take action and make change at the individual, mid (e.g., interpersonal, organizational), and macro social and political levels (Richardson, 1999). Browne called on feminists to recognize and build upon older women's strengths to look for change in socially dictated roles, social structures, and policies that limit older women's participation in the feminist movement. Even as I have finished this study, I am searching for ways to fulfill this call to action with the knowledge this research has given me.

Being informed by feminist gerontologist, I sought to be respectful of and responsive to the women in this study. With that, I embark on one aspect of my study that I had difficulty with: naming the women.

### **Older women, old women: What to name my participants?**

As I set out on the study, I was confounded by what to name the women participants. How might the women themselves refer to their demographic grouping? Older women, elderly women, later life women, women 60-80 (or some other numerical age bracket), old women? What does the 'er' mean in the expression older women? Was I being ageist by using the comparative 'er'?

My eighty four year old mother-in-law deplored the term ‘old women’ when I sought her opinion. My middle aged friends and former colleagues almost all universally objected too. My sixteen year old son called it a “nasty” label. The informal conversations led me to this question: what is it about the word *old* that my circle find so offensive?

Looking to the popular culture for advice, I felt simpatico with the old woman project’s vision. Activists and feminists, Mannie Garza, Janice Keaffaber, and Cynthia Rich, are the brain trust and founders of the old women project. While not an organization, these women join others in claiming and celebrating the word *old*. “The word ‘old’ is a statement of fact, not a matter of shame. We claim it, believing that as long as it is humiliating to be called old, it will be humiliating to be old” (<http://www.oldwomensproject.org/home> page, n.d.).

In a similar vein, feminist gerontology challenges us to accept, celebrate, and integrate our age (Carroll, 2007; Furman, 1999; Twigg, 2004). Andrews (1999) said, “[w]e must be able to call our old people old, acknowledge all the challenge and the possibility that their advanced years embody” (p. 311). Calasanti, Slevin, and King (2006) echoed this sentiment when writing about feminists; the authors said,

They often write or say ‘older’ rather than ‘old,’ to avoid the negativity of the latter. They may see old age as a social construction, and take it as a sign of women’s inequality that they are denigrated as ‘old’ before men are; but we do not often question the stigma affixed to old age. We don’t ask why it seems denigrating to label someone old. Rather than accept this subordination of old people, we should ask what is so unmentionable about this stage of life (p. 15).

Still, as I write this, I remain hesitate to label the women ‘old’. I am anxious about how others—the women in the study, professors, and women I know —might perceive my naming. Perhaps I wonder about myself? I wish to discover an “aesthetic of old that ... renders it imaginable, even desirable” (Carroll, 2007, p. 74). This wondering is consistent with Ray’s

(1996) call for the feminist gerontologist researcher to be self-aware and clear—to be aware of our assumptions, beliefs, experiences, and values about ageing.

In the end, is labeling the women an unfair practice anyway? Is “older” or “old” a grouping that artificially combines individual women, their meanings and experiences? I continue to wrestle with this concept, perhaps trying it on myself, I invite you as a reader to reflect on what old means in your life. As I got to know the women in my study, labels seemed to recede, being old was just one aspect of who the women were.

A call for the renewal of feminism is particularly germane to feminist gerontologists (Douglas, 2010). Douglas specifically identified women over sixty five as one of the groups requiring particular attention from feminists. In their recent review of the women, gender, and leisure literature (from 2006-2010), Henderson and Gibson (2013) called for a continued need to study women’s meanings of leisure, particularly from a feminist perspective. Hesse-Biber (2012) identified that women’s experiences have long been a place to build knowledge and inspire social change, so this study rooted in the day-to-day lives of older women was one answer to Douglas’ and Henderson and Gibson’s calls. Finally, my study on play and older women is a happy coincidence given Douglas’ suggestion that there is a need for an injection of fun back into feminism!

### **Significance and Contribution of my Study**

Older women are a significantly disadvantaged group in society (Arber & Ginn, 1991). An exploration of older women’s play is an important undertaking at the personal, practical, and theoretical levels.

Listening to the views of other women in this environment provided a venue for women to share and inform each other’s perspectives, and through the arts-based methods I employed

(described in chapter 3), provided the women with an opportunity to express themselves in ways they might not normally. The focus groups opened a playful, empathetic, and comfortable space for the women involved in this study.

At the practical level, this study challenges the notion that it is unacceptable for older women to play and be playful. This study made visible the complexity and tapestry of the play aspect of everyday life of some older women. Feminist gerontology asks that we consider what ageing is to older women themselves. Voicing and making visible the meaning, experience, and place of play in the day-to-day lives of older women may, nudges us forward, in a minute way towards reducing ageist stereotypes about what is and is not appropriate for older women to do and what older women are really like. By exploring play in the lives of older women, this study contributes to the literature that demonstrates the diversity, and complexity of ways that older woman live their lives (Dionigi, Horton, & Baker, 2011; Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). This study also adds insight into collecting data through arts-based reflection with older women.

At the broadest level, this study expands our understanding about play in the day-to-day lives of older women. In a small way, this study contributes to the age old question of how we might experience a happier, healthier, and satisfying old age (Holstein & Minkler, 2003). As Gunn Allen wrote about getting older and finding meaning, “growing pains are over and soaring pains have begun” (1997, p. 236).

## **Summary**

This chapter introduced my background thinking and perspective that drew me to a study of play and playfulness in the day-to-day lives of older women. In drawing on feminist gerontology, I set out to highlight the voices and experiences of older women and what it means to play and be playful in their day-to-day lives. In doing so, I incorporated a qualitative research

design integrating phenomenology and arts-based approaches. Arts-based research is designed to provoke, engage, and transform people—important characteristics to engage women in a conversation about and experience of play (Finlay, 2008). Details of my methodology and methods are described in chapter three. In the next chapter, my literature review examines ageing, play, and playfulness with a particular focus on ageism and older women’s play.

## **Chapter Two: Treasure Hunting**

There were two key purposes for my literature review. The first was to develop and enrich my understanding of ageing and ageism particularly in relation to women, and the second was to deepen my understanding of the play literature including how play and playfulness are defined and studied and the meanings and experiences of play for older women. My discussion of older women and play was centred on the emerging body of literature about the Red Hats Society and the Raging Grannies. Other playgroups and women and leisure were also highlighted. My thinking on playfulness was grounded in the works of Liebermann and Barnett.

### **Ageing and Ageism**

#### **My reflections on ageing and ageism.**

As I embarked on this project, feminist gerontology called me to reflect on my perceptions of ageing (Ray, 1996). “Recognition of one’s own attitudes to aging and understanding of how these attitudes influence behavior are critical for developing a working relationship with older people” (Angus & Reeve, 2006, p. 149). Still, I wrote this with trepidation, the warnings and keen observations of MacDonald and Rich (1983) echoed in my head—they admonished me not to romanticize, fantasize, or patronize ageing. Cooper’s (1997) impatience with middle aged women—their barely hidden yet unacknowledged dread and fear of ageing—resonates with me. Perhaps my fears are based on the despair, illness, and decline—the tragedy discourse—so often associated with ageing in our society. Alas, am I like so many other middle aged women so fascinated by ageing, just as I am on the threshold of it (Greer, 1997)?

My views are contradicting, overlapping, and not at all straightforward. In theory I value and respect experience, yet, I recall my Mother’s advice went in the proverbial one ear and out the other. I eagerly await letters from my eighty year old friend Barb, writing about the books



she is reading or the exhibit she just visited at the Detroit Arts Institute; although, when she phones and the talk drifts to mundane details, I lose interest. Am I being ageist, impatient, or do I need to be more respectful and interested in others more generally?

I witnessed one aspect of ageism—that an older person is invisible, incompetent, and unable to make decisions—from a grown child’s perspective. I vividly remember my seventy five year old Father in hospital the month before he died. His cancer had progressed to the point where my Mom did not have the resources to take care of Dad at home anymore. A conversation is indelibly etched in my brain—it involved the hospital social worker, my Mother, and I. My Father was there too. The social worker spoke to my Mother and I about what needed to be “done” with my Dad. All the while my Dad sat invisible—physically ill, mentally competent—unaddressed, not acknowledged. So when theorists and researchers implore us to listen to, advocate for older people, I rejoice.

I do hold a bias, perhaps a privileged perspective given my good health and active lifestyle. I believe people ought to do what they can to contribute to their own well-being. At the same time, I realize there are things outside of our control, structural and institutional forces, that impact how we are and how we age—our physical, emotional, and mental health. In addition, I am aware some may not be capable of or be aware of healthy habits, or not interested in maintaining their health in the same way I am. I see my future self in the physically active older women in Dionigi’s (2006) study who dismissed and distanced the category of “old” as others, people not like themselves, and I do not like what I see.

I am beginning to struggle with another perception of ageism—that youth is more desirable and somehow more attractive. While I do notice my perception of beauty and attractiveness is changing, I am only now starting to question why I dye my gray hair, I

occasionally lament about my expanding middle, and sometimes, when I apply lipstick, I wish my upper lip lines were not there. What is it about these changes that are not acceptable, since they are a reality of my physically ageing self (Andrews, 1999)? Who am I trying to please? What am I trying to avoid? Who am I hiding my ageing from? What is *wrong* with the changes I am undergoing?

I hope my old age is a time of freedom, confidence, growth, learning, a deepening, a knowing and acceptance of who I am and who I have been. Andrews' (1999) ideas resonated with me: “[o]ld age can be, and with some people is, a growing into ourselves. We are still the same people who we always have been, but we are more deeply so” (p. 311). I am deeply touched by the description of an old man from New Mexico who wrote about his wife:

She wears old age like a bunch of fresh-cut flowers. She is old, advanced in years, *vieja*, but in Spanish we have another word for her—a word that tells you that she has grown with all those years. I think that is something one ought to hope for and pray for and work for all during life: to grow, to become not only older but a bigger person. She is old, all right, *vieja*, but I will dare say this in front of her: she is *una anciana*. With that, I declare my respect (Coles, 1973, p. 86).

I hope to become “*una anciana*.” I hold my perspective with trepidation; it is marred by my growing awareness of ageism—my own and society’s.

### **Ageing.**

Unless we die prematurely, becoming an old person is our destiny. Through our biology and our experiences, all of us at every age are growing older, every day. Ageing and becoming older are related to three issues: genetic factors, broad socio-economic influences, and, particularly, later life illness (Baltes & Baltes, 1990).

Sometimes age is perceived as an accomplishment, yet old age is often something we wish to avoid (Carroll, 2007; Laz, 2003). Women often revel when someone guesses us as younger; I have felt it myself, and in an interview with Lipscomb, the feminist Rich candidly

related what she called a common experience, “[t]his happens all the time. I’m told, ‘I’d never guess you were 72,’ and that’s supposed to be the highest compliment you can give someone” (Lipscomb, 2006, p. 6). Celebrating old age, the poet Ruth Harriet Jacobs (1993) eloquently wrote:

Don’t call me a young woman  
It is not a complement or courtesy but rather a  
grating discourtesy.  
Being old is a hard won achievement  
not something to be brushed aside  
treated as infirmity or ugliness  
or apologized away by ‘young women’  
I am an old woman, a long lived woman  
I’m proud of it. I revel in it  
(as cited in Browne, 1998, p. 260)

Despite our natural biological changes, our negative view of ageing does not seem to evenly occur throughout our life course. In that same interview with Lipscomb (2006), Rich vividly articulated this idea,

We should always be standing in front of the mirror, saying, ‘I can’t believe this is my body.’ At age 20, we should be in disbelief that it’s the same body we had at age 5. It’s so marked when we’re old because we’ve internalized that physical revulsion (pp. 4-5).

Because a woman’s value is often based on a youthful physical attractiveness, it is diminished in old age (Garner, 1999; Sontag 1997). Indeed as Furman (1999) indicated, signs of age are interpreted as failure. Our culture trains us early to look for signs of ageing (Twigg, 2004). Some of us pluck the first strands of gray hair, and others put on an extra t-shirt to hide our expanding middles or don “Spanx” lingerie (we are far too liberated to admit we are wearing the girdles our mothers and grandmothers wore). It all makes good business sense too—billions of dollars are generated through anti-ageing products (Carroll, 2007; Furman, 1999).

## **Agelessness.**

Despite visible signs of ageing many older people and writers contend that inside our spirit remains as it always has been—sometimes articulated as youthful or ageless. In her study of older people, Kaufman (1986) explained that old people expressed and retained their identity throughout their lives through themes “rooted in personal experience, particular structural factors, and a constellation of value orientations” (p. 149) and referred to this concept as “agelessness.” In Kaufman’s view ageing becomes almost an afterthought or simply a collection of external visible markings that demonstrate our age. Andrews (1999) called for us to have a more nuanced perspective,

[m]any old people feel that they are the same person deep inside as they have ever been (and might, therefore, express this in terms of ‘not feeling old’). At the same time, they are changed by the years they have lived, not only physically, but psychologically. Thus, old people’s readings of their social world, and their positioning of themselves within it, are very nuanced, and it is the complexity of this perspective, complete with its apparent self-contradictions, which researchers must try to keep hold of as they proceed in their investigations (1999, p. 313).

This paradox can make reconciling and celebrating external markers and internal feelings a particular challenge. Andrews’ ideas resonate with me, and this nuanced perspective was especially important as I undertook this research project.

Citing de Beauvoir, we are implored to recognize, embrace, and celebrate the totality of our humanity, and not erase our ageing selves (as cited in Andrews, 1999). Indeed, Andrews stated,

The pretense that old age does not exist, the belief that we can somehow wish it away, is the ultimate seductiveness of agelessness, but it comes at a great cost, as de Beauvoir reminds us, for it strips us of our own future (1999, p. 303).

Carroll (2007) concurred, arguing if we split ourselves into a forever young person inside and an ageing woman outside, we minimize our past and deny our future. Andrews named agelessness

as a form of ageism and claimed if we deny our age, we reject one of our richly deserved resources: age.

### **Society's discourse on ageing.**

Society's discourse on ageing and being old tends to be negative; stories of decline and loneliness often prevail (e.g., Kaufman, 1986; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009; Roy, 2007; Stalp, Radina, & Lynch, 2008). Carroll (2007) stated,

Old is an amalgam of perceptions, both visual, as in greying hair and wrinkles, and psychological, as in being less productive, less active and less flexible. Thus, it is a societal construction and is embedded in discourses of productivity, attractiveness and capability; old is negatively positioned in relation to each of these qualities (p. 76).

Writing on resistance and ageing, Wearing (1995) concluded that the "emphasis on deficiency in ageing ignores the potential that each person possesses and reinforces the social constraints and negative stereotypes associated with ageing in our society" (p. 273).

Garner (1999) strongly contended that we have isolated old women, removed them from the mainstream, and "found them pitiful. ... We have impoverished, disrespected, and disregarded old women, ... We have made old women invisible so that we do not have to confront our patriarchal myths about what makes life valuable or dying painful" (p. 3). I believe there is truth to Garner's words and argue that studies like this one aiming to bring older women, in their everyday lives, to the forefront provide a welcome contrast to the negative discourse that pervades society's perceptions of older women.

Perhaps the dominant medical discourse of decline and illness has also contributed to our negative stereotypes and dominated our perspective of ageing (Dionigi, Horton, & Baker, 2011; Johnson, 1995; Silver, 2003; Wearing, 1995). Unlike the medicalized or tragedy discourse of ageing, the reality of ageing is far more complex. As Sarton (1997) pointed out, our tendency to only depict the negative side of old age is a little like showing children as only disabled, starving,

or neglected. This perspective places physical and mental health in the privileged position of determining how society views ageing and results in a problem focused approach (Holstein & Minkler, 2003).

Some argue it is not that older people, particularly women, deny themselves as old; rather, older people do not see themselves in the culture's stereotypical depictions of older people (Arber & Ginn, 1991). The authors wrote,

What elderly people are denying is not their age, but a derogatory stereotype of incapacity and encroaching senility in which they do not recognize themselves or most of their peers. In a society which penalizes old age severely, a woman's efforts to avoid the appearance of ageing may be a rational response to the prevailing prejudice, a means of escaping the consequences of age discrimination (Arber & Ginn, 1991, p. 45).

If only understanding ageing was "Nice 'n Easy" like the Clairol's hair colour product.

### **Ageism.**

Old people are stereotyped and vilified as: confused and forgetful. Senile. Unable to learn, or at least not as quick, obsolete and old fashioned. Declining health: eyesight, hearing, strength, flexibility. Ageless. Sexless or asexual, "letting *herself* go." Invisible. Lonely, frail, vulnerable, desperate, and depressed. Dependent, helpless, and passive. Grumpy old man. Little old lady. Witch. Crone. (What inflection did you read that with?) Lecherous old man. Silver fox. Sexy senior citizen. Cougar—no—that is too young, the sexual older woman is brutally referred to as "dish rag." Of course, others are romanticized grandmothers, wise woman, or the vibrant healthy couple in the pharmaceutical advertisements.

We are of course, none of those, and all of those. People are layered, complex beings with experiences that transcend simplistic notions (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). Angus and Reeve (2006) suggested,

ageist stereotypes obscure the reality that older people by and large have the same needs as the rest of the community, that is, the need for participation in and contribution to

education, sport, and creative and political activity. They also have the same needs for housing, health care, recreational opportunities, and social interaction (p. 145).

One troubling issue with ageism is that we often become who we are told we are (King, 2008; Reinharz, 1986). This makes resistance to ageism difficult (Ray, 1996). Ageist beliefs are also passed through society without consideration (Angus & Reeve, 2006).

At the root of the dominant discourse of ageing is ageism. Coined by Butler in 1969, ageism is the systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old (Butler, 2005). Connecting prejudice against older people, to struggles of women and blacks, sexism and racism were the catalysts for Butler's naming of ageism. Today, more than forty years later, the devaluing of older people and the desire to prolong youth in (North) American society continues to be pervasive (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003; Kluge, 2007).

Women in particular are the target of ageist assumptions (Garner, 1999; Greer, 1997). Without reproductive capability and perceived reduced sexual attractiveness, women are viewed as useless and devalued from man's perspective (de Beauvoir, 1970 as cited in Silver, 2003). In our patriarchal society, women's value is undermined as we age, no longer useful as sexual, reproducing, or productive (i.e., wage earnings) beings. Older women are relegated to become caregivers, dependent on the care of others, or simply overlooked. With reduced power in our culture, older women are discarded, forgotten, and rendered useless.

At times older women deny their aged selves and propagate ageist attitudes. For instance, some of the women participants (the most active ones) in Dionigi, Horton, and Bellamy's (2011) study and Carroll's (2007) research did not refer to themselves as old (regardless of their chronological ages beyond 65). They viewed older women as an 'other' category of which they were not part. While in her late 50's Carroll said, "[n]one of my participants, me included, would name ourselves as old. We accept our years and the experiences

that go with them, but we are not old. If required, we might name ourselves as middle aged” (2007, p. 74). Women and feminists sometimes project ageist assumptions onto older women (MacDonald & Rich, 1983). Sara, age 81, one of Kaufman’s (1986) study participants voiced this ageist perspective “...I have sort of drifted in with younger people. I like it better. I still feel young in spirit. I can’t stand being with old people, some of them are dead and don’t know it” (p. 10). Describing her involvement at a Take Back the Night march, sixty five year old Barbara MacDonald lamented about her interaction with a young feminist, the march’s marshal,

[a]ll my life in a man's world, I was a problem because I was a woman; now I’m a problem in a woman’s world because I’m a sixty five year old woman. Hearing once more that I was not in the right place and thinking, ‘If not here, where?’ (MacDonald & Rich, 1983, p 20).

Still others suggest that we are better off today—showing our age less (Silver, 2003). I am troubled by Silver’s view:

[b]etter quality of life, preventive medicine, and sophisticated use of technology—including cosmetic surgery—have slowed down the ageing process. ... Today, older individuals—especially the aging baby boomers—are better educated, better-off financially, and more sophisticated about ageing than previous generations (p 380).

Silver’s view seems out of step with feminist gerontology’s call to celebrate rather than avoid or put off our ageing. How has the ageing process slowed down? Is this slowing just the external visible markers of age? Who benefits from this slowing? Does lack of gray hair or fewer wrinkles really slow the ageing process, or does it simply reinforce Featherstone and Hepworth’s “mask of age” (as cited in Silver, 2003) or the desire to be young? Why are we trying to pass ourselves off as younger than we are? Does this focus on the self actually further entrench ageist views and force us to erase age markers? Or if we dye our hair or smooth our wrinkles are we protecting ourselves and resisting ageist stereotypes? Are efforts to look young really a desire to be counted, accounted for, or noticed? Clearly, the analysis is not straightforward. If we do everything in our power to avoid ageing, how can we respect age (Holstein & Minkler, 2003)?



Indeed, Furman (1999) asked if the attempt to look younger was associated with resistance against ageing or capitulation to market forces.

Even ageing theories reflect an ageist bias (Kluge, 2007). For example, in the 1960s, disengagement theory posited as people age, we turn inwards, reducing our roles and activities, and Kluge's corollaries were "I'm over the hill" or "I'm all washed up" (2007, p. 180). Kluge connected the adage "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" with social withdrawal theory when rapid environmental changes create obsolescence, putting older people out of touch with new trends (2007, p. 180). When stability is valued over change as in the ego-integrity theory, Kluge invoked, "I'm not what I used to be" (2007, p. 180). Connecting Helen Keller's famous motto, "life is a daring adventure or nothing at all" (Kluge, 2007, p. 181) to gerotranscendence theory, older people are asked to be outward focused with renewed goals, broadened and deepened relationships with self and others, and even a mystical or spiritual enrichment. Is this a hopeful vision for some, but a romanticized version of old age for others? Kluge concluded her paper with these powerful, hopeful words, "[p]aying attention to the insidious ways in which conventional beliefs about aging shape perceptions of self and others is transformational and a first step toward personal and societal change" (2007, p. 188). I agree with Kluge's assessment that I need to be mindful of my words and my own personal beliefs and values about ageing.

As I embarked on this study, it was critical that I troubled society's notions of ageing and how that may be reflected by the women themselves and how the women might be impacted. Being sensitized to issues around ageing and ageism was essential as I considered feminist gerontology in this study. I now move to a discussion of play beginning with a broad discussion of how play is studied.

## **Play**

### **How is play studied?**

Play is studied across a range of disciplines and thus definitions tend to vary across traditions (Burghardt, 2010; Sutton-Smith, 1997). A common thread found throughout the study of play is a focus on its function. Sutton-Smith explained different disciplines approach the study of play according to their focus, for example, to biologists, sociologists, educators, and psychologists, play is adaptive or contributes to growth. Researchers from the arts and literature imagine play as a means to creativity and self-expression (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Leisure sciences perceive play through lens of personal experience, such as intrinsic motivation, fun, relaxation, or escape (Sutton-Smith, 1997). (Note, unless we conceive of all as leisure play, I would argue there has been relatively little play literature emanating from leisure studies.) While we might study play within our disciplines, our experience of play might be quite different (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Human needs and desires exist outside the silos (Morin, 2008). I wondered: what might this mean for the study of play, particularly in women as we age?

### **Child's play.**

While play has been studied across the life course, the focus has been overwhelmingly on children, specifically pre-school and toddler children (L'Abate, 2009; Pelligrini, 2011; Yarnal, 2006). Research on children's play has focussed to a large extent on play as a function and the cognitive, emotional, social, and personality factors that shape play. It has pretty much been devoid of examinations on the *experiential* aspects of play.

Like the broader study of play, child's play has been examined by a wide spectrum of disciplines, including, for instance, psychology, sociology, education, and anthropology (Pelligrini, 2011). Child's play has been attributed with lofty benefits (L'Abate, 2009), indeed

Pelligrini reported “play is indispensable to the healthy development of children” (2011, p. 363). Child’s play is most often associated with cognitive, social, and emotional adaptation or development (Elkind, 2008; Kleiber, Walker, & Mannell, 2011; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Elkind stated, “through play, children create new learning experiences, and these self-created experiences enable them to acquire social, emotional, and intellectual skills they could not acquire in any other way” (2008, p. 1). Erikson (1972) described the importance of play as a way for the child to experience and to truly understand the world.

In contrast, Sutton-Smith (1997) argued the study of child’s play has largely ignored the power and identity rhetorics which are a real part of the play worlds of children. Sutton-Smith acknowledged an opportunity to extend the research into the actual experience and reality of children’s play. That being said, this brief synopsis focuses on child’s play as progress and development, as it is most often studied.

Play in the earliest stages of life is closely aligned with how we develop physically, socially, cognitively, and emotionally in the world. Brown (2009) reported our earliest play begins with a safe and well fed infant and mother (or father) bonding through eye contact. This bond or attunement sets the stage for our emotional self-regulation.

Young infants begin to make sense of the world through their bodies, or movement play. Through movement we engage and sculpt our minds. In Erikson’s (1963) model of life stage development, baby’s play establishes trust (as cited in Kleiber, Walker, & Mannell, 2011). Object play emerges as toddlers begin to play with anything and everything and begin to learn to solve problems (Brown, 2009). Pretend play emerges around ages 2 to 4 and children develop representative intelligence and language development (Piaget, 1962, as cited in Kleiber, Walker, & Mannell, 2011). Associative play predominates the play of 4 to 7 year olds as they may begin

to play and share with others (Parten, 1932, as cited in Kleiber et al., 2011). Finally between the ages of 7 and 12 children learn co-operative play (Parten, 1932, as cited in Kleiber et al., 2011).

Cognitive, social, and emotional development are important aspects of child's play. Imaginative play can begin as early as age two. Children piece together bits of stories and begin to learn to put together full narratives as they grow (Brown, 2009). Imagination, dreaming, and fantasizing sets the stage for our ability to be creative, understanding, and emotionally resilient (Brown, 2009). Children learn different aspects of social play beginning with, according to Parten, parallel play (at about 3 or 4) age which sets the stage for mutual play (as cited in Kleiber et al., 2011). As Brown noted mutual play is the path to developing empathy. Rough and tumble play helps children develop social awareness, cooperation, fairness, and selflessness (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Celebratory and ritual play are learned as children grow up in social environments where for instance, families or schools enact special holiday dinners, birthday parties, dances, or other special festive traditions (Brown, 2009).

As I have described, researchers, teachers, and parents are intuitively aware and have ample justification for the importance of play to a child's development (Eberle, 2012; Gray, 2011). Child's play is often theorized as a tool for learning; for cognitive, physical, and psychosocial development; or otherwise rationalized to give a purpose to play (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Still, Cohen (1993) challenged much of prescriptive stage / age / play development approach as largely contrived through typically constructed experimental or laboratory observation based studies. Cohen called for a more nuanced perspective of play that might be gained through home, day care, and school environments where play naturally emanates. Child's play is also often thought of as natural and fun, as Brown (2009) intoned, "[n]early every one of

us starts out playing quite naturally. As children, we don't need instruction in how to play" (p. 6).

### **What is play?**

Elusive to define, there are all kinds of play (e.g., Burghardt, 2010; Ellis, 1973; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Burghardt, Cohen (1993), and Sutton-Smith argued play needs to be broadly defined and variable. In Sutton-Smith's (1997) seminal work, *The Ambiguity of Play*, he argued the word play is used to describe a diversity of meanings, experiences, and activities similar to other omnibus categories such as religion, culture and war. In this aptly titled work, Sutton-Smith synthesized play by looking at popular ideological rhetorics of play. The rhetorics have a basis in: culture, history, and scholarly or scientific disciplines and provide a wide array of perspectives—activities, behaviours, attitudes, and state of being—from which to consider play. Age is not a defining characteristic for any of the rhetorics and is treated as a puzzling factor in the definition of play, Sutton-Smith stated,

[a] play theory of any comprehensiveness must grasp this strange companionship of the very young and the very old, the first waiting to begin and the second to finish; one with dolls and trucks and the other with quilts and golf (1997, p. 48).

Sutton-Smith's rhetorics provide a wide perspective from which to study and consider play.

Still, the search for a comprehensive definition was not accomplished with Sutton-Smith's *Ambiguity of Play* (Sutton-Smith, 2008). Compelled to put forward a new definition of play because he believed his earlier work was inadequate, Sutton-Smith offered a renewed definition highlighting the complexity of play:

Play begins as a mutation of real conflicts and functions thusly forever afterwards. Play was always intended to serve a healing function whether for child or adult, making it more worthwhile to defy the depressing and dangerous aspects of life. Play is neurologically a reactive itch of the amygdala, one that responds to archetypal shock, anger, fear, disgust, and sadness. But play also includes a frontal-lobe counter, reaching for triumphant control and happiness and pride. Play begins as a major feature of mammalian evolution and remains as a major

method of becoming reconciled with our being within our present universe. In this respect, play resembles sex and religion, two other forms—however temporary or durable—of human salvation in our earthly box (p. 124).

In his more recent definition of play, Sutton-Smith argued that play is part of our evolutionary progress as humans, in other words, play is built into our genes through the lower part of our brain. At this level, humans naturally and spontaneously play for its own sake. Sutton-Smith came to believe that in the long run, “[p]lay’s positive pleasure typically transfers to our feelings about the rest of our everyday existence and makes it possible to live more fully in the world, no matter how boring or painful or even dangerous ordinary reality might seem” (2008, p. 97). Sutton-Smith argued that play is also processed and developed in the front part of the brain, our thinking area, one where play can enhance our lives.

Others felt a definition of play had to be comprehensive enough to allow study across animal species from humans to apes to rats to birds. Starting from the perspective of animal play, Burghardt’s (2010) ideas about play ran parallel to Sutton-Smith’s (1997) broad conceptions of play. Burghardt reiterated that play needs to be studied and understood as a multifaceted, varied phenomenon spanning humans and animals. Burghardt stated,

[p]lay, in all its diversity, is a phenomenon identified by a set of criteria and not an unitary category, does not have a single evolutionary origin or history, and cannot be considered to have a single function or even, perhaps, any function at all (2010, p. 349).

Burghardt’s starting position for play is also evolutionary and in the brain. To work towards a definition of play, Burghardt believed play needs to be distinguishable from not play, so he developed a set of five criteria which he argued can be applied to animals and humans.

According to Burghardt’s criteria play is: not necessary to survival; spontaneous, voluntary, or autotelic; in some way different from the behaviour it is similar to in non-play circumstances (e.g., exaggerated, incomplete); often repeated; initiated when an animal (including humans) is

adequately fed, healthy, and free from acute or chronic stress. Burghardt suggested at least one aspect of each criteria must be met in order to identify the behaviour as play. While this is somewhat easier to identify in behaviour, Burghardt acknowledged not all play is observable making the criteria somewhat more difficult for a researcher to recognize or corroborate. Under Burghardt's criteria, our participation in formal and structured play would have to be voluntary (i.e., to satisfy one element of spontaneous, voluntary, or autotelic) in order to be accepted as play.

Huizinga (1955) described the essence of play as fun and characterized play as a thing on its own. Huizinga conceptualized play to include the “play spirit,” joy, fun, and pretending. Huizinga believed play was a defining characteristic of humanity and thusly entitled his seminal work, *Homo Ludens*—“[m]an the player”—equal to *Homo Sapiens* (the knower) and *Homo Faber* (the maker) (Huizinga, 1955, p. i). Huizinga wrote “genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilization” (Huizinga, 1955, p. 23). Huizinga's lens was cultural, and he examined play for its social manifestations. His overarching theme was that play underpinned cultural functions from language to the arts, to law, philosophy, religion and the sacred.

In his articulation of play, Huizinga (1955) began with what he perceived to be play's essence, and started where biology and psychology left off. Huizinga said,

Summing up the formal characteristics of play, we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their differences from the common world by disguise or other means (1955, p. 13).

In theorizing about play, Huizinga believed play stood outside of “wisdom and folly, ... truth and falsehood, good and evil. ... has no moral function” (p. 6). Huizinga became one of the great play scholars of our time (Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Play is foundational in the evolution of communication (Bateson, 2006). Writing about psychotherapy, Bateson posited that play was paradoxical and metacommunicative. He illustrated the notion of play within a paradoxical frame. Using an example from the animal world, Bateson asks us to consider is the dog's bite really a bite or a playful nip? From Bateson's perspective, the primary function of play was as adaptive communication.

The conception of play that most reflects my view is play as a humanizing state contributing to our happiness and well-being—allowing us to flourish. Stuart Brown best articulates this perspective. As founder of the National Institute of Play, Brown is dedicated to bringing awareness and communication about the transformative nature of play to the world (Eberle, 2009). Brown's interest in play was seeded through his work as a physician clinician. In his work he noticed how children recovering from rubella gave their first signs of recovery by demonstrating the desire to play, even before physiological signs of recovery emerged. Following this work, Brown collaborated as part of a multidisciplinary research team assembled to understand the motivations of the Texan mass murderer Charles Wilton (Eberle, 2009). The first finding in this investigation was the pervasive emotional and mental abuse Wilton endured growing up. The second finding, which surprised the research team, was the lack of childhood play in Wilton's life. Subsequently, Brown discovered similar findings surrounding play, or lack of it, in other studies of murderers and drunk driver accidents involving death.

Pressed in Eberle's (2009) interview to define play, Brown responded,

[Play is]...an ancient, voluntary, inherently pleasurable, apparently purposeless activity or process that is undertaken for its own sake and that strengthens our muscles and our social skills, fertilizes brain activity, tempers and deepens our emotions, takes us out of time, and enables a state of balance and poise (Eberle, 2009, p. 412).

Brown claimed that when we play, we cultivate talents and develop skills that help us explore and understand the world.



Play is a state of mind, a joyful act and relief; it is a spark and key to our humanity (Brown, 2009). Brown sought to engage and entice adults to play by writing the book *play, how it shapes the brain, opens the imagination, and invigorates the soul* for mass consumption.

Speaking to the importance of play, Brown stated,

Most obviously, it is intensely pleasurable. It energizes us and enlivens us. It eases our burdens. It renews our natural sense of optimism and opens us up to new possibilities (2009, p. 4).

Play is a catalyst (2009, p. 7).

In the end, it is largely responsible for our existence as sentient, intelligent creatures (2009, p. 24).

A lack of play should be treated like malnutrition – it's a health risk to your body and mind (2009, p. 215).

And finally, Brown elegantly stated,

Play is how we are made, how we develop and adjust to change. ....in the end the most significant aspect of play is that it allows us to express our joy and connect most deeply with the best in ourselves, and in others. If your life has become barren, play brings it to life again. Yes, as Freud said, life is about love and work. Yet play transcends these, infuses them with liveliness and stills time's arrow. Play is the purest expression of love. When enough people raise play to the status it deserves in our lives, we will find the world a better place (2009, p 218).

Brown's optimistic, hopeful conception of play entices, motivates, and speaks to my notion of play. Like Brown, I view play as an expression of our humanity with much promise for enriching and enlivening the lives of older women.

### **Playfulness.**

Play is sometimes described as an experience, while playfulness is often described as a personality construct, an expression of our personality, or a way of being (e.g., Kleiber et al., 2011). Still, conceptually play and playfulness are closely connected, sometimes even indistinguishable. For instance, Brown's (2009) conception of play was as a "state of being" and Lieberman's (1977) thought of playfulness as the "quintessence" of play. In this section, I

review the playfulness literature which primarily focuses on the idea of playfulness as a state of being or dimension of personality.

Playfulness is described as the embodiment of play (Lieberman, 1977; Lugones, 1997). Lieberman sought to capture what play is “by asking *how* we play and by presenting data that identify a concept [she] labeled *playfulness*” (1977, p. xi, author’s italics). She likened playfulness to a kaleidoscope which takes the familiar and transforms it into something new and different. Sense of humour; joy; and physical, social, and cognitive spontaneity were the key components Lieberman used to describe playfulness in children. In her kindergarten studies, Lieberman discovered playful children typically smiled readily, were physically active, displayed “glint-in-the-eye” behaviour, were fluid in their play with classmates, and were more imaginative. Lieberman conceived of playfulness as a personality disposition.

Playful adolescents share similar characteristics as do playful children (Lieberman, 1977; Staemplfli, 2005). A key distinguishing factor for adolescent playfulness is the environment. For instance, in Lieberman’s study of high school students she discovered two main types of playful people: the first, an acceptable (to teachers) group that were physically alert, enthusiastic, and intellectually curious; and, the second group that were physically mobile, joyful, and humorous and perceived (by teachers) as attention-getting, disruptive, lighthearted, mischievous, extroverted, joking and witty, and intent on having a good time (Lieberman, 1977). Lieberman’s preliminary findings on post adolescents and adults indicated that playfulness may be less acceptable in these age groups.

Playful people have the ability to transform any environment to make it more stimulating and enjoyable (Barnett, 2007; Lieberman, 1977). In studying young adults, Barnett identified

four underlying components of playfulness including: being gregarious, uninhibited, comedic, and dynamic. Barnett defined playfulness as:

the predisposition to frame (or reframe) a situation in such a way as to provide oneself (and possibly others) with amusement, humor, and/or entertainment. Individuals who have such a heightened predisposition are typically funny, humorous, spontaneous, unpredictable, impulsive, active, energetic, adventurous, sociable, outgoing, cheerful, and happy, and are likely to manifest playful behavior by joking, teasing, clowning, and acting silly (2007, p 955).

It is in this particular ability of the playful person as being able to transform any situation into something else, that I was intrigued. For example, as I entered this study, I wondered how might being playful help older women resist society's ageist notions of who they should be? Later in this chapter I introduce the Raging Grannies who playfully use their identity as a tool for social activism as one example of this.

In a later study, Barnett (2011-2012) discovered playfulness was related to how people approached leisure as opposed to the actual leisure activity itself. Although Barnett calls for further research, her suggestion that "exuberance and *joie de vivre* -- all but disappear as playfulness moves from childhood through adolescence and into young adulthood" (p. 187) is surprising to me. This research has yet to be extended to older adults. More questions emerged for me: why is it assumed that play and playfulness disappear as we get older? Or does it? Is it just devalued as we get older? Certainly in studies of the Red Hats Society and Raging Grannies, playfulness in older women abounds (e.g., Roy, 2007; Yarnal, 2006; Yarnal, Chick, & Kerstetter, 2008).

While Barnett (2011-2012) found only minor gender and racial differences in playfulness among younger adults, she concluded "playfulness in women is more complex than for men" (p. 189). Signs of playfulness tends to be more observable in men than women, for instance, men visibly demonstrated their gregariousness through communication style (e.g., joking) while

women's expression of gregariousness was more internalized through social bonding rather than a communication style (Barnett, 2011-2012). A second characteristic of playfulness, being uninhibited, was manifested in women through range and expressiveness of emotions while men demonstrated this characteristic behaviourally through risky adventure and new experiences (Barnett, 2011-2012). The comedic element of playfulness was also focused on the self for women, while for men it was manifested in a sense of humour (Barnett, 2011-2012). Finally being dynamic was pronounced more in personality, emotions, and motivational orientation for women while both men and women reflected the active and energetic aspect of playfulness (Barnett, 2011-2012).

The conception of playfulness as a personal strength injected with a spirit of lightness and flexibility resonates with me. The feminist Lugones' (1997) came to consider her conception of playfulness as a person travelling between worlds—as a serious nonplayful scholar versus a playful, Argentinean immigrant woman. Lugones studied play and playfulness through Huizinga and Gadamer and identified her conception of play to be quite different from their agonistic definitions of play which often prioritize competition, and rules. Lugones suggested,

[r]ather *the attitude that carries us through the activity, a playful attitude, turns the activity into play.* ... So, positively, the playful attitude involves openness to surprise, openness to being a fool, openness to self-construction or reconstruction and to construction or reconstruction of the “worlds” we inhabit playfully (Lugones, 1997, p. 158, author's italics).

Lugones' conception of playfulness is directly connected with how she understood play.

Echoing Lugones' sentiment, Cohen (1993) said, “Americans tend to admire men and women who work *hard* and play *hard*. Perhaps we need to convince ourselves that it is more than possible to play soft, to play playfully or, even, to work playfully” (p. 186). There is a lightness and fun that I read between the lines in Cohen's ideas that echo Lugones and mirror what I imagine playfulness to be.

Daydreaming and fantasy, conceived of as ‘mind-play’ by Singer and Switzer (1980), demonstrates a creative way we may use our ability to be playful within ourselves to live a richer life. Singer and Switzer conceived of daydreaming as a form of play that has restorative and transformative power. Further, our age, health, physical abilities, economic resources are not a barrier to daydream, fantasize, and create vibrant inner lives (Singer & Switzer, 1980). Thus Singer and Switzer’s conceptualization of mind-play, as a form of inner playfulness, may help us live well as we age.

Some contend playfulness is associated with good character (Synder et al., 2011). Sense of humour and playfulness are conceived of as one of twenty four human character strengths in positive psychology (Synder, et al., 2011). Examined through the lens of positive psychology, Proyer and Ruch (2011) discovered a strong connection between playfulness and strength of character. Playfulness was best predicted by sense of humour, followed by intellectual character, emotional character, but lower towards restraint. Proyer and Ruch concluded that playfulness contributes to the “good life” (2011, p. 11). In these ways, for some of us, through our personality or way of being, playfulness is woven into the fabric of our day-to-day lives. Playfulness is conceived to offer several important benefits. For instance, playfulness is thought to contribute to our physical and psychological well-being (Barnett, 2011; Hutchinson, Yarnal, Strattsfordson, & Kerstetter, 2008; Son, Yarnal, & Kerstetter, 2010). Playfulness is believed to incite creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Glynn and Webster (1992, 1993) thought playfulness was a sign of higher intelligence and they believed it was a desirable characteristic that would enable a cohesive work environment. In fact, Glynn and Webster (1992) developed an adult playfulness scale to measure playfulness. Fullagar (2008) suggested some women embody a playful self in their leisure that helps in their recovery from depression.

There is limited research on adult playfulness, and scant regarding playfulness in older women (Barnett, 2007; Staempfli, 2007). The extant literature is primarily quantitative, based on scales measuring playfulness. Still, based on our limited knowledge, there are some indications playfulness is an important component to healthy ageing (Yarnal & Qian, 2011). The authors defined playful older adults as,

happy, optimistic, cheerful, amusing, positive, enthusiastic, and relaxed. In everyday exchanges, they tend toward mischief, naughtiness, clowning, joking, and teasing; they embody fun and humour in ways that translate into laughter and amusement in others. Although impish, they are circumspect about their behavior in ways that teenagers have not yet mastered. Nevertheless, again, they continue to approach the world with a measure of creativity and whimsy (Yarnal & Qian, 2011, p. 71).

This definition and emergent research foretells a potentially important place for playful older women. As I read this literature I was excited to discover how their stories might illuminate women's thoughts on playfulness and its place in their lives.

### **Play as we age.**

Adult play seems to be mostly addressed in the footnotes of play study and theory. Researchers bemoan the lack of study on adults and play (e.g., Cheang, 2002, Cohen, 1993; Yarnal, 2006). Sutton-Smith (1997) pointed out how adult play may be perceived of as not worthy of study, as if play becomes merely a diversion to adults and our development through play stops. Indeed Cohen noted, play research rather "peters out round when children are eleven or twelve" (Cohen, 1993, p 11). Cohen suggested adults are self-conscious about play, and highlighted the need for more play and more research about play throughout the life course.

Despite the lack of attention on play and adulthood, some have even argued that adulthood without play may be harmful (Brown, 2009). In an interview for the *American Journal of Play* (2009), Brown posited that play provides us with flexibility and when adults do not play much, the consequences are rigidity, depression, lack of adaptability, and loss of

humour. It is posited that the adult's need for flexibility and openness may be enhanced through play (Erikson, 1972).

In North America, the Puritans had a decidedly negative impact on acceptance of play, yet adults have continued to play (Cohen, 1993). Adult play may actually be on the rise through sports, computer games and toys targeted to adults, and adult self-help (fashioned as a kind of play) as main areas of play growth among adults (Cohen, 1993). In his interview for the *American Journal of Play*, Mintz also noted a striking increase in adult play (Eberle, 2010).

To demonstrate just how important play might be in adulthood, I cite a study of people who have faced death. When asked what they would do more of, if they had more time, one of the main things they said was “to enjoy themselves (including activities like travel and *play*)” (Kinnier, Tribbensee, Rose, & Vaughn, 2001, p. 174 italics added). It is with this wish for play that I began to examine the study of play with women starting from the perspective of leisure. I started here because of the lack of research on older women and play, and because play has been called the quintessential leisure experience (Kleiber et al., 2011).

### **Women and Leisure**

Leisure is endowed with a multiplicity of meanings for women. Leisure is a context for empowerment, self-development, liberation, and change (Henderson, Shaw, Freysinger, & Bialeschki, 2012). A context for self-expression (e.g., Roy, 2007) and fun (Green, 1998), leisure can transform and give us meaning (e.g., Kleiber et al., 2011; Yarnal, 2006). Freedom and freedom of choice can be both found in and missing from women's leisure experiences (Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1996). Leisure can also be a site for exclusion, oppression, and disempowerment based on gender (Henderson, Freysinger, Shaw, & Bialeschki, 2012).

Leisure can be used as a site of resistance (Shaw, 2001; Wearing, 1998). Women use leisure to resist the burdens of social expectations of femininity and hegemonic masculinity (Wearing, 1998; Yarnal et al., 2008). Society places expectations on women, for example, what it means to be feminine, motherhood, and our place within families, yet leisure also offers women the opportunity to express and reinvent themselves (Henderson & Shaw, 2006). In leisure, women are more likely to depart from gender stereotypes than men (e.g., Dionigi, 2006), yet, leisure can also reproduce gender differences (Dionigi, 2006; Green, 1998).

The need for resistance against sexism is based on the assumption that oppression, inequities, and constraints exist (Shaw, 2001). Shaw argued women have agency and can use leisure as resistance. Women can use leisure to negotiate, reduce, or remove power others hold over them both individually and collectively (Shaw, 2001). Through leisure, new discourses, viewpoints, beliefs, and changes can be enacted. Women, however, are not necessarily conscious of their resistance, yet through their visions and values of self, they can chart their own course, different than society's expectations (Shaw, 2001; Wearing, 1998).

Conceived of as an experience for self and/or in connection with others, leisure is often woven into the fabric of our day-to-day lives (Henderson et al., 1996). "For many women, their everyday lives tend to be holistic; work and leisure may coexist and be difficult to distinguish" (Henderson et al., 1996, p. 99). Resistance to gender norms and expectations can be undertaken in leisure particularly as it is integrated in women's everyday lives (Fullagar, 2008).

Henderson et al. (1996) ascertained that some things that may appear to be leisure are *not* because of women's responsibility to care for others. For example, how do we conceive of cooking, as a responsibility or a leisure opportunity? How might a tired mother describe "playing" with her children? Havitz (2007) exemplified this idea through his autoethnography



about his Grandma. While read in the social construct of the time, Grandma's leisure—gardening and cooking—were part of her farm work, yet she clearly enjoyed this 'work' as leisure. In contrast, Grandma Havitz seemed to differentiate activities that she did not enjoy, for instance, laundry, as work. In the responsibilities and joys of the everyday running of the family farm Grandma Havitz experienced leisure. Havitz' impression of his Grandma's everyday life demonstrated that leisure and work are not necessarily two sides of a coin rather more integrated and interwoven, particularly for this woman, as Havitz perceived it to be, in her life.

Wearing (1998) argued feminists need to rethink leisure from the work/non-work dichotomy. Wearing contended there is a need to “rewrite the concept of leisure so that it reflects spaces that women make for their own sense of self-worth and pleasure – spaces of negotiation, resistance and possible transformation” (1998, p. 157). Wearing utilized Foucault's concept of “heteropia,” to designate a personal leisure space where women can become who they want to be, to challenge or resist masculine hegemony and cultural stereotypes. In Wearing's vision, “[l]eisure, then, produces spaces for becoming and can expand the horizons of such becoming” (1998, p. 159). As I hope you will see later in this chapter, the studies of the Red Hats Society and Raging Grannies clearly illuminate this idea.

Friendship and humour are important aspects of leisure in the day-to-day lives of women. Women's friendships and relationships are strengths carried with us throughout our lifetimes and may help to alleviate the effects of older women's disadvantages (Arber & Ginn, 1991). Women's friendship is epitomized through 'talk,' and women gain a sense of belonging, display vulnerability, and dissolve traditional gender identities through this talk (Green, 1998). Everyday talk, interactions, and activities can also be a site of gender relations and resistance (Henderson et al., 2012).

Humour can be an important aspect of women's friendships that allow us to challenge and shape our gender identities (Green, 1998) and to imbue our everyday lives with play and playfulness. Indeed, older Swedish women found the use of humour in their everyday lives to be source of strength and a coping mechanism (Forssén, 2007). Sense of humour has been identified as a character strength that contributes to our ability to forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning (Ruch, Proyer, & Weber, 2010; Snyder, et al., 2011).

Fun and pleasurable experiences enhance our present moment and contribute to our long-term psychological well-being (Mannell, 2007). This link between fun and well-being is posited in Fredrickson's (1998) broaden and build theory of positive emotions which supposes that through experiencing positive emotions like joy, we build our resilience, creativity, and well-being. In a later study, Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, and Conway (2009) suggested "lived experiences such as joy and interest are what start the process of exploring, learning, connecting and ultimately building new resources" (p. 367). With this theory in mind, women recovering from serious illness and depression have been found to use leisure in bettering their lives.

#### **How some women use leisure in recovery.**

Some seriously ill women have used leisure to enhance their holistic health and well-being, transform their lives, and give them meaning and purpose (e.g., Gosselink & Myllykangas, 2007; Parry, 2008; Shannon & Shaw, 2005). The women in the Gosselink and Myllykangas study came to believe "that the meaning of leisure had become the meaning of life" (2007, p. 16). Leisure was used to meet goals, for example, walking to improve health; provided values (e.g., conscious evaluation of life's priorities), provided a sense of efficacy (e.g., volunteering to make a difference), and enhanced self-worth (e.g., partake in support group with other breast cancer survivors) (Shannon & Shaw, 2005). The physical, mental, social, and

spiritual health of breast cancer survivors was enhanced through dragon boat racing (Parry, 2008). Breast cancer survivors found new purpose in life through dragon boat racing and used this leisure to feel alive again, as one woman declared, “Through my involvement in dragon boat racing, I demonstrate an example of not just being a survivor, but a *thriver*” (Parry, 2008, p. 231, author’s italics).

Women recovering from depression have used leisure in their everyday lives to recover and transform their lives (Fullagar, 2008). Fullagar identified “emotion play:”- “playful practices embodied an ethos of lightness, letting go, relaxation, and enjoyment” (2008, p. 45). Friendship and social connections were found to be critical to women’s recovery from depression (Fullagar, 2008). Women used creative practices (e.g., journaling, writing poetry) to find a “voice and space” and to transform their identities (Fullagar, 2008, p. 46). Fullagar called leisure a “counter-depressant” and posited it contributed to women’s recovery where traditional biomedical treatments could not.

These studies demonstrate that leisure has the potential to hold deep value in cultivating meaning and purpose, enhancing health and well-being, and helping women transform their lives. As I listened to women tell about their lives, the findings from these studies reminded me of the powerful role leisure can hold in some women’s lives. I now turn the discussion to older women and leisure.

### **Older women and leisure.**

Research has discovered older adults who participate in leisure activities tend to be happier and report lower psychological distress (Dupuis, 2008), yet, leisure activity tends to decrease as we age (Kleiber et al., 2011). Gibson, Ashton-Shaeffer, Green, and Autry (2003) described retirement-aged women’s leisure as being focused on a search for meaning-centre

activities, was related to care for others and self, and was linked to an overall sense of well-being. Leisure for older women can be characterized by adapting to change—in roles and abilities (Henderson et al., 1996). Wearing (1995) suggested as we age, leisure is about what we *can* do, and she asked her readers to think about how people experience leisure in everyday life – is it in a way that acquiesces to ageism or in a way that resists it?

Positive or successful ageing is often promoted through physical activity in later life (Dionigi, 2006). Today a dominant belief is that older people should take preventive measures to remain physically active, healthy, and live independently for as long as possible—placing the burden of responsibility on the individual. In her study with master’s athletes, Dionigi indicated “[t]he data revealed clear indications of a society that idolizes health, ability, and independence and that devalues aging” (2006, p. 192). Dionigi identified a fine line between the benefits of health promotion, physical activity, healthy living, and independence on one side with burdening the elderly, building unrealistic expectations, and even propagating ageist beliefs on the other.

Gendered roles can be both enacted and resisted in older women’s leisure. For example, Boyle and McKay’s (1995) study of older women and men’s leisure through mixed league lawn bowling found traditional gender roles being reproduced as women took care of the men rather than tending to their own needs and interests. In contrast, Heuser’s (2005) study of older women lawn bowlers discovered that women tended to their needs and built community, felt joy, social camaraderie, and engaged in physical activity. Much more is to be said about older women’s leisure through play, and this is where my literature review now turns.

### **Older Women and Play**

The importance of play as a centre for gender expression and action was underlined by Henderson et al. (2012), “[g]ender in all its manifestations (e.g., bodily practices, emotional

expression) is also enacted in play, recreation, and leisure” (p 2). Until recently there has been little study of older women and play (Cheang, 2002; Yarnal, 2006). This gap might be a result of ageism, reflecting a lack of research on older women in general, a mirror of society’s devalued perception of play with adults, or some combination of these factors. More recently, our knowledge is beginning to unfold through an emerging body of leisure literature about older women and play. The contexts have varied from the social (e.g., The Red Hats Society) to the political (e.g., The Raging Grannies) and playgroups. Taken together, these studies have demonstrated how play brings joy, friendship, social connections, empowerment, resistance to ageism, and health and well-being into older women’s lives. In next section of the literature review, I examine the Red Hats Society, the Raging Grannies, and informal playgroups respectively and how they inform our understanding of older women and play.

### **The Red Hats Society.**

The Red Hats Society is a self-described “disorganization” of women who are 50 years and older. Their mission “supports and encourages women in their pursuit of fun, friendship, freedom, fulfillment, and fitness” ([http://www. redhatsociety.com](http://www.redhatsociety.com), n.d.). With over one million members in more than 30 countries around the world, the Red Hats Society has been the subject of media attention, books, and several leisure research projects (10 are referenced in this thesis) (e.g., Yarnal, 2006). The Red Hats Society promote itself as “the international society dedicated to reshaping the way women are viewed in today's culture” (<http://www. redhatsociety.com>, n.d.).

The Red Hats Society is a relatively homogenous group of women who tend to be White, educated, and middle class (Kerstetter, Yarnal, Son, Yen, & Baker, 2008; Yarnal, 2006). In addition, women may join the Red Hats Society because they are looking for play, fun, and

socialization (Kerstetter et al., 2008) thereby, influencing the organization's composition and consequently the research as a result.

The data used in eight of the ten studies appeared to come from one online survey administered on the Red Hats Society website; although, this is not verified. A copy of the online survey was not published in its entirety in any of the studies I analyzed. Based on what was published in the articles, the online questionnaire appeared to include open and closed questions. For instance, Son et al. (2007) indicated rich data was mined from the online survey, with over 750 single-spaced pages of text generated in response to: “[w]e are interested in any stories you might like to share about meaningful experiences you have had through your Red Hat Society membership” (p. 93). Yarnal (2006) is clear in her methods, with data coming from focus groups and individual interviews.

Despite these limitations, these studies are a rich reflection of play in the lives of older women who belong to the Red Hats Society. Taken together, I found six themes that ran through the Red Hats Society studies which helped inform my thinking on play, ageing, and older women.

***Playing, being playful, and having fun.***

Fun was a central component of play to the women in Yarnal, Chick, and Kerstetter's (2008) study, which explicitly set out to define play. The authors' described how the Red Hat Society's members conceptualized fun,

[f]un meant freedom *from* a constellation of factors like worry, responsibility, loneliness, isolation, stress, and depression. Fun also meant freedom to engage in boisterous, loud, effusive, spectacular, publicly expressive, shared, and collective forms of playful self expression, which several women remarked was ‘unusual’ for older women (Yarnal et al., 2008, p. 246).

The women described play in terms of people—being with like-minded others, friends, and family; being social; laughing, being silly, and goofy. "This group of older women embraced

play with gusto, enthusiasm, and senses of freedom, liberation, and abandon" (Yarnal, et al., 2008, p 247). Dressing-up was a form of play for nearly all the women across the studies (e.g., Stalp et al., 2008; Yarnal, Son, & Liechty, 2011). The women defined play as non-serious, voluntary, and that it occurs in safe and secure contexts. Experimenting, doing things the women might otherwise not do was important to the play of some women (Son, Yarnal, & Kerstetter, 2010).

Belonging to the Red Hats Society gave women the opportunity to be playful and being playful was an important element for some women in the Red Hats Society (Mitas, Qian, Yarnal, & Kerstetter, 2011). Playfulness allowed women to build resources including social attachments (Son et al., 2007). Playful behaviour was engendered by attention from others, in particular for some women, from men (Yarnal et al., 2008).

Conceptually play and playfulness were connected through behaviour and feelings of fun both engendered. Play was less about an experience and more a way of being for the women of the Red Hats Society.

### *Discovering the self anew.*

The Red Hats Society allowed women to define and enhance themselves through personal transformation and social identity (Son et al., 2007). Life change and meaning were created through the Red Hats Society with opportunities for transformation and expansion of life goals, changed priorities, and a new lease on life (Yarnal et al., 2011).

The idea of self is embedded in the title of Yarnal et al.'s 2008 study and reflected the thoughts of many women woven throughout the studies: "I Did Not Have Time to Play Growing Up . . . this is my play time. It's the best thing I have ever done for myself" (p. 89). In several of the studies women described finding and transforming themselves and building their self-

confidence. For instance, one woman described her thoughts "[w]hen I put on a red hat, I feel like a new person. Sort of like an actress playing the part of a confident, lovely, fun woman" (Son et al., 2007, p 96). The accepting, non-judgmental milieu of the group led women to develop their self-worth and build confidence (Son et al, 2007). In describing how the Red Hats Society enriched their sense of self—an evolving self—the women's words resonate best: "sense of dignity ... liberation ... special ... accepted ... renewed sense of being" (Yarnal et al., 2010, p 57).

Women did important care work for themselves through involvement in the Red Hats Society (Stalp et al, 2008). Son and Yarnal (2011) supported the importance of self-nurturing and self-care after years of caring for others. Women felt empowered and entitled to leisure through the Red Hats Society (Son & Yarnal, 2011). Belonging to the Red Hats Society enabled some women to be more self-expressive, it also inspired some women to be more reflexive (Son et al., 2007; Yarnal et al., 2011). The quantitative results in Son and Yarnal's study corroborated the findings "that dressing up was a meaningful way of self-expression and social identity formation and maintenance" (2011, p. 223).

The poignant thoughts of one woman described the importance of the Red Hats Society to a renewed sense of being and happiness:

A series of life events was leading me into a depressive state. The fun and sisterhood involved has given me a renewed sense of being. There is nothing more glorious than a bunch of "older" dressed up women laughing at life (Son et al. 2010, p.78).

Mitas et al. (2011) described how the women became more optimistic by giving themselves permission and opening themselves up to play. Another woman described the influence the Red Hats Society had on her newfound comfort in her own skin, and how it extended into her role as a grandmother,



I have wasted most of my life being 'grown up,' now I'm 'growing down.' I sit on the floor and teach my granddaughters how to play jacks, roll down a snowy hill, take them out to lunch and order dessert first (Mitas, et al., 2011, p. 42)

*Developing and nurturing friendships and socializing with others.*

Red Hats Society membership provided women with a play space and a context for nurturing friendship and social relationships (Yarnal, 2006). Positive social interaction and friendships were developed with individual Red Hats Society chapters and the wider organization (Yarnal et al., 2011). Yarnal et al. (2008) recognized the important role of play in fostering women's friendships. Membership in the Red Hats Society might decrease the risk of social isolation (Yarnal et al., 2008).

Women described developing a social network with other women with similar life events as critically important to membership in the Red Hats Society (Son et al., 2007). Meeting people the women might not have otherwise met was an important benefit of the Red Hats Society (Kerstetter et al., 2008). Women gave and received social support, some even described a sisterhood they felt with other ageing women. The Red Hats Society was portrayed as an additional avenue for social support (Kerstetter et al., 2008). Emotional and social support was found and engendered through spending time with friends and like-minded older women, connecting and re-connecting with the wider community. Women frequently mentioned getting attention from others as another social benefit.

Through their participation, the women developed social capital through the Red Hats Society (Son et al. 2010). Building social capital may improve individual health and well-being and that of the wider community (Son et al., 2010). The organization built a strong sense of community and many women became engaged with their communities through the Red Hats Society. While not a volunteer organization, some women described how their membership led

them to contribute to the wider community, for example through initiating a Red Hats Society group in a nursing home.

***Redefining ageing for women.***

The Red Hats Society encouraged and permitted women to define and redefine ageing (Stalp et al., 2008). The Red Hats Society provided the space, dress, and community to play with and resist the stereotypes of ageing (Stalp et al., 2008; Yarnal, 2006). Older women reported being and feeling invisible, yet in their Red Hats Society regalia of red hats and purple outfits, they got noticed (Yarnal et al., 2008). Yarnal (2006) stated, “playful, vibrant, public celebration can not only promote a counter cultural message about older women, but Red Hat Society ‘Regalia’ also *visibly* spreads that message in a non-threatening manner” (p. 69, authors italics). Nora expressed what it meant to be a Red Hatter,

When we get on our purple and our red, we’re allowed to be silly. . . . And we’ve reached a point just like it says in the poem that we’ve raised our families, we know what society dictates, but there’s still some fun left in us, and we wanna be able to laugh, and we wanna be able to act silly, and we wanna be able to kick up our heels, and we wanna do it with friends so we’re not out there alone just acting stupid that they think they have to take us away because we’re mad. We’re allowed to do that when we wear our red hats and our purple outfits and we go as a group. (Stalp et al., p. 336).

Nora’s words explain how being visible, old, and fun with friends is acceptable, indeed celebrated as a Red Hatter. By being a Red Hats Society member, Nora is able to make visible her conception of being an older woman. Another woman explained,

Ageing is difficult in a youth oriented society and the Red Hat Society allows you to be proud of your mature status. I have noticed that when I am in my Red Hat Regalia, people treat me with more respect and interest (Yarnal et al., 2011, p.58)

Outlandish dress and behaviour oppose society's expectations of ageing women, “Red Hats Society members visually and behaviorally challenge societal notions about older women” (Stalp et al., 2008, p. 344). Dressing-up was used as a means for re-imagining ageing (Yarnal et al., 2011). The women relished the opportunity to be noticed, to be someone other than the

stereotypical, invisible, older woman. Stalp et al. described how the women challenged dominant perceptions of women and older adulthood in three ways. First, the Red Hats Society is not a charitable organization (so often the norm for women's groups). Second, with their red hats and purple clothing, the older women dress and act in boldly feminine ways, re-inviting the male gaze. Evoking play, Stalp et al. described the Red Hats Society dress as "toying with traditional notions of femininity and ageing" (p. 325). Parodying the notion of ideal dress and behaviour, the women resist ageism and challenge stereotypes. Stalp and her colleagues argued that the women used their exaggerated performance of the feminine to rewrite and reproduce traditional gendered scripts. Third, through play, dress, fun and laughter, the women resisted ageism – either intentionally or not (Son et al., 2010).

The women demonstrated how experiences most often associated with youth can also be lived in older adulthood. "Red Hats Society members are not fading into the woodwork as society expects of aging women, as they publicly take up leisure space, have fun, and engage in personal leisure that only benefits them" (Stalp et al., 2008, p. 325). Positive experimentation with personal and public images of the feminine and the ageing process were enabled by dressing in the Red Hats Society's regalia (Yarnal et al., 2011). The process of opening up—to new friends, new activities, and the meaning of old age itself—was recognized as a positive aspect of the Red Hats Society (Mitas et al., 2011).

### ***Enhancing health and well-being.***

Psychosocial health benefits were developed and enhanced through the Red Hats Society including: creating happy moments, responding to transitions and negative events, and enhancing the self (Son et al., 2007). This thought was eloquently described by a woman in Yarnal et al.'s (2011) study:

I have some very difficult medical problems and have found that being able to just have fun and laugh has made them easier to deal with. The Red Hat Society has definitely given me many opportunities for fun and laughter! (p. 57).

Coping was enhanced through Red Hats Society participation (Hutchinson et al., 2008).

Hutchinson and colleagues described four means of coping: as a context for social support, for emotional regulation, for sustaining coping efforts, and for meaning focused coping. Women used the Red Hats Society as a way to cope with relief from chronic and acute stressors, help them through life transitions and negative events, and feel relief from daily hassles (Son et al., 2007). One woman said, "[j]oining the Red Hats Society has been one of the most therapeutic things that I have ever done for myself" (Hutchinson et al., 2008, p 987). Participation in the Red Hats Society also revitalized some women. In fact, some members identified the main reason for their involvement with the Red Hats Society was to help provide relief from all kinds of stress, challenging life transitions, and daily hassles. Playful adults demonstrate a higher level of resilience which should in turn lead to better psychological health, and the Red Hats Society members resoundingly affirmed this contention (Yarnal et al., 2011).

Older women's play may have far reaching consequences for helping older women age as they experience significant changes in their lives (e.g., illness, death of family members and friends, movement to new home environments). The women in the Red Hats Society experienced fun and frivolity which gave them immediate stress relief. Through regular contact with other women, Red Hatters experienced positive emotions like joy, pleasure, enjoyment, love, and bliss which the women claimed helped to buffer the effects of long term problems and issues.

These studies offer rich, descriptive insight into play in the lives of older women. While I acknowledge the size and strength of the Red Hats Society, there are many more women who

are not and would not be members of an organization like the Red Hats Society (Stalp et al., 2008). Some more politically motivated older women participate in the Raging Grannies.

### **The Raging Grannies.**

The Raging Grannies are an intriguing international organization of older women's "gaggles" that are playful and use play as a tool for political activism and social change. The organization's key issues include peace, the environment, feminism, and child poverty. The Raging Grannies dress-up as stereotypical "grannies" in flamboyant garb and utilize humour to engage their imaginations in song and dance to enact political activism and achieve social justice aims (Roy, 2007; Sawchuk, 2009). Rather than be bound by structure or rules, the Raging Grannies are "guided by friendship, sense of urgency, action, pragmatism, and mischievous fun" (Roy, 2007, p. 253). In the words of Roy, involvement with the Raging Grannies brought about "profound social and political engagement."

Growing out of a group in Victoria, British Columbia, through the use of play and playful behaviour in images and actions, the Raging Grannies challenge society's assumptions that getting older is to be avoided, feared, hidden, delayed or prevented (Narushima, 2004; Roy, 2007; Sawchuk, 2009). The Raging Grannies demonstrate that older women are not to be discarded, ignored, or assumed not to contribute.

Angered by their ageist treatment as invisible and irrelevant, some women were motivated to join the Raging Grannies. The movement spoke to the need to break the silence of older women and proclaim their mission in a song:

Hey, look us over,  
Grannies proud and strong  
Time to hear our voices,  
Time to hear our song  
Silent for too long,  
Speaking out at last

'Cause now the earth  
Is crying out

....

Hear the Grannies' voices sing! (Roy, 2007, p. 150).

Granny L was explicit when she stated we “[f]eel an anger about social stigma of ‘older woman’ as ‘being past, useless, and not really involved’” (Narushima, 2004, p 30). Granny Joan Harvey put it another way:

Older women are completely transparent and invisible: you try to go anywhere to do something, and you can stand there for hours and you’re not there. For the most part, in our culture...older people are not revered and respected; they are ridiculed – “Get out of the way, old woman,” you know. I can’t remember who said it, which of the Grannies: “Well, the only way we’re going to get anyone to notice us and pay attention is to dress ridiculously. Now that we have your attention, listen to what we have to say” (Roy, 2007, p, 153).

The Raging Grannies are a pathway to empowerment for older women seeking alternative ways of ageing and engaging more fully in the world (Narushima, 2004). The Raging Grannies provide a social and collective learning environment that help older women cultivate their creativity, critical thinking, sense of self-liberation, and well-being in late adulthood (Narushima, 2004, p. 41). The Raging Grannies are dedicated to lifelong learning (Narushima, 2004).

The Raging Grannies provide joy, meaning, improved life satisfaction, and health and well-being to their members (Hutchinson & Wexler, 2007; Narushima, 2004). Narushima quoted Granny R,

Oh, I feel good about it. Besides, I have a nasty chronic disease, which means I’m often sick. But it’s all right. Part of what Grannyng does for me is that it makes me feel I can do things. I do push harder at things than if I wasn’t sick. I think being sick may even be part of why I’m a Raging Granny. I’m fighting for myself. I need to have a life, not just lie around in bed. But I’ve never thrown up at a Granny gig yet (Laughter) (p. 38).

Hutchinson and Wexler (2007) explicitly set out to explore if raging was good for older women’s health. They unequivocally concluded that it was.

Women in both the Red Hats Society and the Raging Grannies resist ageism and challenge stereotypes, and belonging engenders joy and well-being for their members. The body of literature emanating from studies of the Red Hats Society and the Raging Grannies is beginning to help us understand play, albeit for a relatively narrow range of women. Less formal groups of women exist within communities that offer older women opportunities to play, and this is the direction I now take with my literature review.

### **Playgroups.**

Playgroups are another way that play has been explored for older women and men. Heuser's (2005) study of older women lawn bowlers is an example. Physical activity, camaraderie, a genuine caring for others, and involvement in a community of interest characterized the benefits older women experienced playing bowls. The bowls provided the women with the vehicle to build their community and to develop a context to participate in and celebrate their social relationships. Even after retirement from bowls, the women continued to participate in the club through card playing and socializing. A key finding from Heuser's study was that rather than focus on their physical decline and inability to participate in sports or other physically active pursuits, the older women found it valuable to focus on finding personal meaning after participation in the bowls ceases.

Play emerged as a powerful and meaningful activity for older people engaged in a variety of playgroups (e.g., tennis, bowling) engendering health and well-being (Hoppes, Wilcox, & Graham, 2001). Play was found to be a way to gain physical and mental fitness for study participants in these groups (Hoppes, Wilcox, and Graham, 2001), and it is well documented that the benefits of physical and mental fitness are health and well-being (e.g., Dionigi, 2006; Dupuis, 2008; Mannell, 2007). Other key benefits Hoppes et al. identified support the contention that

older people look to find meaning in life as they age. For example, meaning was found through continuity (many had started participating in the activities when they were much younger and continued as they aged), competition, and by providing structure and belonging.

Leisure and play can be particularly important in retirement (Cheang, 2002). In his ethnographic study of 23 older adults who regularly congregated in a fast food restaurant, Cheang described why the participants go to the restaurant, “[s]tated simply, these older adults came to the restaurant to ‘play’ and, for the most part, they came to the restaurant to be with their playmates” (Cheang, 2002, p. 314). The gathering provided the playgroup with community, a routine replete with group norms and rituals, and a setting to be with friends. Interestingly, the participants perceived senior’s centres as for older people and overly structured, not a place to ‘hang out with friends.’ Participants felt a sense of control including the level of sociability they wanted, and they spent time with people with whom they chose. Further, the group provided the participants with delight and amusement, laughter, a sense of belonging and allowed them to ‘simply be.’ Unlike the Red Hats, this group did not receive emotional support from each other; in fact, there was a purposeful avoidance of deep personal exchange. Cheang concluded the paper with this comment: “These older adults, who are physically independent and engaged in productive activities, have created an opportunity for themselves to play, laugh, and be positively appraised on a regular basis” (2002, p. 319).

## **Summary**

In my literature review I sought to explore and review important aspects of ageing and ageism, play and playfulness theory, and older women’s leisure and play. Ageism is a pervasive problem in society, and it impacts women more directly and deeply than men. Making older



women visible through the reality of their everyday lives is one important way to celebrate older women and defy stereotypes. This study is one nearly imperceptible movement in that direction.

Feminist gerontology and other researchers call for study of older women's lives, from the perspective of older women. The literature I reviewed demonstrated play may be an important space for older women to age well and to resist ageist and gendered stereotypes.

Nonetheless our understanding of older women's play and playfulness is limited. Play has been studied largely from the perspective of children, not older women. In recent years, studies of the Red Hats Society, the Raging Grannies and other playgroups are emerging. This study aims to contribute to this burgeoning literature and explore play with women outside these formal venues in their everyday lives. In chapter 3, I discuss phenomenology, the methodological approach I used for this study. I share my vision and rationale for integrating arts-based research into this project. My data collection, sampling, and analysis are also included in the next chapter.

## Chapter Three: Dancing through the Maze

### Phenomenology

To understand the experience, meaning, and place of play in the day-to-day lives of older women I sought a methodology designed to engage the participants in sharing, talking, and telling about their lived experiences. Qualitative research is designed to explore and understand human beings and our lives (Creswell, 2009). The methodology for my research sought depth, richness, and connection with the women in the study. Phenomenology is one such methodology (van Manen, 1990).

With its beginnings in philosophy, phenomenology has been adapted in many disciplines, for example, education, psychology, anthropology, and nursing (Wertz et al., 2011). Phenomenology is the study of lived experiences (e.g., Giorgi, 2009; van Manen, 1990). It “investigates *what* is experienced and *how* it is experienced” (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 125, author’s italics). Phenomenology seeks to see the world as people experience it (Daly, 2007). On a deep level, phenomenology seeks to serve our very nature as human beings “[s]o phenomenological research has, as its ultimate aim, the fulfillment of our human nature: to become more fully who we are” (van Manen, 1990, p. 12).

Phenomenology is the study of our lifeworld (e.g., Daly, 2007; Giorgi, 2009; van Manen, 1990). Van Manen explained the lifeworld is simply our everyday experience. For a more complete understanding of our lifeworld, we are asked to consider experience on four levels: time (temporality), space (spatiality), body (corporeality), and with others (relationality). Giorgi described Husserl’s use of the lifeworld as “the common, everyday world into which we are all born and live. It is usually a world of ordinariness” (p. 10). As a ubiquitous notion, play is a topic well suited to phenomenology. Exploring women’s lives, seeking to understand how play

is experienced in the course of the everyday, phenomenology guided me in discovering and learning what play and playfulness was to older women. Phenomenology helped me understand how play and playfulness were experienced, what they meant, and the place play and playfulness had in the day-to-day lives of older women.

Phenomenology studies what is both real and imagined (Giorgi, 2009; van Manen, 1990). Giorgi explained things do not have to have physical existence to be experienced, and, as examples he offered dreams, ideas, and memories. Play has been conceived of as an activity, a state of being, and a mindset, so play is a topic well suited to phenomenology.

Phenomenology is studied from the perspective of consciousness (Giorgi, 2009; van Manen, 1990). Giorgi contested it is through our consciousness that we come to know and experience life; specifically, he described consciousness as “the medium of access for any knowledge whatsoever” (p. 68). Van Manen said our consciousness is transitive, meaning it must have an object “to be aware, in some sense, of some aspect of the world” (p. 9). Consciousness is what we objectively and subjectively perceive. Giorgi suggested “phenomenology is interested in describing both—what is given to consciousness and how it is given” (p. 68).

Phenomenology is also the study of meanings. “Phenomenology attempts to explicate the meanings as we live them in our everyday existence, our lifeworld” (van Manen, 1990, p. 11). As Giorgi (2009) said, “[m]y method also seeks meanings” (p. 95). Phenomenology seeks to answer the question, “what is the nature of the phenomenon as meaningfully experienced” (van Manen, 1990, p. 40). Through deep analysis of life experiences, the phenomenologist comes to clarify meaning.

Van Manen (1990) described phenomenology as scientific and human study. It is scientific in that it is systematic and explicit, in analysis and method. Phenomenology is human in its understanding of the meaning of lived experiences—lived time, lived space, lived body, and lived relationships. Phenomenology asks the researcher to be thoughtful and attentive to people and their experiences. Indeed, van Manen said “thoughtfulness” characterizes phenomenological research. Van Manen described thoughtfulness as deep, sensitive, inventive, and reflexive thinking. Through thoughtfulness and tact phenomenologists need to act responsibly and responsively (van Manen, 1990). Being thoughtful and empathic were important aims in my conversations with older women. Phenomenology is a sensitive research methodology, and this was the tone I strove to engage in my project.

Novice researchers are further advised to decide where they position phenomenology: art or science (Finlay, 2009). Phenomenology is science as a knowledge producing activity and in the careful articulation and practice of a methodology (Giorgi, 2009; van Manen, 1990). It is art in interpretation and intuitive analysis and communication (van Manen, 1990). Giorgi posited phenomenology requires a special sensitivity to human beings, and I perceive that as art. My conception of phenomenology is the marriage of art and science in understanding the human condition (van Manen, 1990).

An important aspect of this methodology is the phenomenological attitude and reduction. Van Manen (2006) described the phenomenological attitude as living the everyday with a wondering and constant questioning of what intrigues. In my case, it was: what is it like for older women to play? What is it like to be playful? How is play reflected and experienced in the everyday lives of older women? Giorgi (2009) suggested the phenomenological attitude begins with a heightened awareness of the researcher’s awareness to consciousness. Adopting the

phenomenological attitude requires empathic immersion, slowing down and dwelling in the research participants' experiences (Wertz et al., 2011).

The phenomenological attitude looks beyond the object itself (i.e., play) and seeks to explore the ways something is enacted and how the underlying meaning is understood (Wertz et al., 2011). Giorgi (2009) used the example of our response to a child's belief in Santa Claus to demonstrate the phenomenological attitude. As an adult we know the man dressed in a red and white costume is just that, but the child perceives him to be Santa Claus, and so we assume a phenomenological attitude when we understand, perceive and hold the child's belief. We still perceive the man behind Santa Claus, yet we see and understand the experience as the child does. I adopted the phenomenological attitude by asking what it is like to play and be playful (van Manen, 1990).

The phenomenological reduction involves first a wondering and preoccupation with a particular phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). This slowing, questioning, and broadening of awareness is the first step in reduction, a technical term phenomenologists use to discover the essence of what is studied (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological reduction continues by breaking from the natural attitude which means to not presume the meanings or perceptions of the world as we might in our everyday life (Giorgi, 2009). Van Manen described it this way, we often "know too much", not too little (1990, p. 47). It is this idea of putting aside, a stripping away, of preconceived private and public (e.g., theories, sensitivities) knowledge, conceptions, and assumptions that enable us to see what something really is, particularly from the perspective and experience of someone else. Phenomenologists call this bracketing. Van Manen, however, questioned the idea of completely bracketing understanding and instead suggested,

it is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories. We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in

order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character (1990, p. 47).

Giorgi (2009) cautioned the reader not to engage our past while trying to understand the present.

Giorgi's insight reminds me that without being fully aware of my consciousness, I might miss the richness and depth of my research participants; he said "we often diminish the present experience by interpreting it as being identical to past ones" (2009, p. 91).

Phenomenology seeks to illuminate the essence(s) of an experience (e.g., Giorgi, 2009; van Manen, 1990). Through the essences, phenomenology seeks to understand the nature, essential meaning, or "whatness" of something (van Manen, 1990, p. 177). Wertz et al. (2011) simply and clearly described essences as "what things are" (p. 126). Bringing in the important element of consciousness, Giorgi described the essence as "the object as it exists for consciousness, not as it is in itself" (p. 93). (Remember Santa Claus!) The essence is sometimes also called a structure (Giorgi, 2009; van Manen, 1990). Van Manen said, "phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience" (1990, p. 10). By using phenomenology, I focused on the essential whatness and meaning of play and playfulness to the women in this study.

Cohen (1993) argued we need to expand our study of play beyond the laboratories and into the lives of people. Also embedded in this study was exploring the place of play in ageing, so the selection of phenomenology is consistent with the call for research aimed at understanding the experience of ageing from the perspective of older people as they live out their lives (Holstein & Minkler, 2003). I believe this made phenomenology a natural and meaningful methodology for researching ageing and play.

Novice researchers are called to consider and make clear which phenomenological paradigm they intend to practice (Finlay, 2009). My study was a hermeneutic phenomenological study because I aimed to both describe and interpret the women's experiences and meanings of the lived experience of play (van Manen, 1990). While Giorgi (2009) specifically cautioned against interpretation and favoured description to articulate an essence, he stated, "for phenomenology, the essential characteristic has to be intuited ('seen') and described" (p. 77).

Van Manen said,

Hermeneutic phenomenology tries to be attentive to both terms of its methodology: it is a *descriptive* (phenomenological) methodology because it wants to be attentive to how things appear, it wants to let things speak for themselves; it is an *interpretive* (hermeneutic) methodology because it claims that there are no such things as uninterpreted phenomena (1990, p. 180).

As a student researcher, I was drawn to the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology whereby, the experiences, descriptions, and voice of the participants are centre stage. I hold a deep respect for a person's perception being their reality. I understand that my findings and conclusions are just that—mine. However, the idea that the researcher actively listens, observes, considers, analyzes, intuits, interprets, and renders a description which might help illuminate a person's meaning and experiences so the previously unthought and unsaid is made clear is so exciting – to me this is the communion of communication – to be understood! This is the heart of my methodology, that the women share their meanings and experiences of play, and that I interpret and communicate these back to them and a wider audience to somehow make an impact. Van Manen (1990) articulated this concept well, "so that *in* words, or perhaps better, *in spite of* the words, we find 'memories' that paradoxically we never thought or felt before" (p. 13). As the supervisor, leisure programs – senior's programs said to me on the telephone, "there was so much buzz around here after the women read your summary. They feel listened to." (personal communication, February 24, 2014).

## **Arts-Based Research**

As I was in the midst of planning my study it came to me that I wanted to integrate the arts into my research methodology. I was continually reminded of the idea that play is elusive to define, but you know it when you experience it (e.g., Brown, 1998; Sutton-Smith, 2008). Arts-based research enlarges human understanding through nuance, empathic feeling, fresh perspective, and emotions (Eisner, 2008). Eisner argued that the arts “give us access to expressive possibilities that would not be possible without their presence” (p. 5). Arts in research is evocative and provocative, its aim is to create an empathetic sense of life in those who encounter it (Cole & Knowles, 2008).

Eisner (2008) argued empathy is an important element of arts-based research, “[e]mpathy is a means to understanding, and strong empathic feelings may provide deep insight into what others are experiencing. In that sense, the arts in research promote a form of understanding that is derived or evoked through empathic experience” (p. 7). This sense is true to the hermeneutic phenomenologist’s aim to understand lived experience. Phenomenology and arts-based research almost seem inherently linked—van Manen (1990) spoke of unearthing the unsaid and unthought; arts-based research seeks to show knowledge that we cannot tell, and to use any vehicle possible to elicit that knowledge (Eisner, 2008).

Thus, I set out to explore the lived experience of play and playfulness in the lives of older women by integrating phenomenology with arts-based research. T. King (2008) argued “[t]he truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (p. 14). T. King wrote that the stories we tell and believe about ourselves become the way we know ourselves. An important element of this research project was to explore the women participants’ experiences and meanings of play through their memories and stories. Cole and Knowles (2008) highlighted “[t]he central



purposes of arts-informed research are to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry” (p. 59). Eisner (2008) said, “[t]he products of this research are closer in function to deep conversation and insightful dialogue than they are to error-free conclusions” (p. 7). I used arts-based research in my methods to help access women’s experience and meaning of play in the place of their lives, but also to provide a space where the women might experience play. This is explained in detail later this chapter.

The use of images in arts-based research sparks questions, discussion, design, and imagination (Weber, 2008). In articulating her thoughts, Weber said,

this ability of images to evoke visceral and emotional responses in ways that are memorable, coupled with their capacity to help us empathize or see another’s point of view and to provoke new ways of looking at things critically, makes them powerful tools for researchers to use in different ways during various phases of research (p. 47).

Weber inventoried an extensive list of reasons to use visual images in research, among those relevant to my study were: to capture what is hard to articulate in words, to pay attention to things in new ways, to elicit emotional and intellectual responses, to enhance empathetic understanding, and to communicate more holistically.

Arts-based research stimulates imaginative thinking and “purposely facilitates imaginative thinking about multiple, new, and diverse ways of understanding and living in the world” (Finley, 2008, p. 80). Finley suggested arts-based research often “exposes oppression, targets sites of resistance, and outlines possibilities for transformative praxis” (p. 71), themes resonant with advocating and studying women, particularly older women. This perspective aligned well for phenomenological research with older women and play.

Quoting Heidegger (1926/1996), Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis, and Grauer (2006) said, “[a]rts-based educational inquiry requires a certain state of mind, an artful ‘dwelling,’ an

ever-present meditative, imaginative, creative process of meaning making and interpretive activities rooted in perception and language” (p. 1255). This thinking is suggestive of the phenomenologist’s aim for the phenomenological attitude. Without making a direct plea for arts-based research, Wertz et al. (2011) inadvertently suggested, “knowledge of highly implicit meanings requires creative language and that some important aspects of human experience are best conveyed with evocative prose” (p. 135).

The role I envisioned for arts-based research in this study was to transport the women beyond their conversational words to discover a fresh perspective of play in their lives and express deep, rich descriptions of the meaning and experience of play and playfulness; in Neilsen’s (2008a) words to research participants, “take me there” (p. 96). Jipson and Paley (2008) evolved their research practice to be arts-based to engage themselves, their participants, and the audience in their topic.

I bring this section to a close with a comment on the ongoing debate in the academy about the artist skill required of the researcher as artist in arts-based research (e.g., McNiff 2008; Piirto, 2002; Sinner et al., 2006). Piirto, a published poet, novelist, and arts-based researcher, suggested the skill of the artist/researcher is critical in artistic rendering, particularly in knowledge translation. Nonetheless, Piirto recognized the value of arts-based inquiry in the process to the ‘self-exploring novice’ researcher and research participants, she stated,

fun - as personal creativity enhancement. The participants gained self-knowledge. ... To have everyone, especially fearful novices, be able to experience, through the body, the dance, the drama, the visual art, the poetry, is valuable. The difference between workshop and performance/display is vital here (2002, p. 443).

Sinner and colleagues took a different tact and placed the emphasis on the research itself and asked the reader to consider not the quality of the art as in, “[i]s this good arts-based research?” rather “[w]hat is this arts-based research good for?” (2006, p. 1252). McNiff suggested the

challenge in arts-based research is not the artist skill of the researcher or participants, rather the issue is we need to let go and act with spontaneity. This motif was consistent with my goal to inject play and playfulness into the research process. Indeed Coles and Knowles (2008) asked, “[h]ow do the arts (broadly conceived) inform the research process?” (p. 60).

I am not an artist. What I hoped to bring alive in my study was play and a sense of being playful. I hoped by injecting arts based activities into my methods, I would energize, provoke, and spark play and playfulness with the women in the study. Bringing together art and play seemed synchronistic to me, from our childhood renderings of art in kindergarten to Huizinga’s (1955) invocation that art is fundamental to play. Through engaging playfully with the arts it was my hope that the women would not only experience some aspect of play but also be opened to thinking about and reflecting play in alternative ways, possibly leading to new discoveries of self. As you will see in chapters four and five, I believe I accomplished this goal.

Finally, calling to mind Merleau-Ponty, van Manen (1990) suggested phenomenology is a building, a truth, a reverberation. “So phenomenology, not unlike poetry, is a poetizing project; it tries an incantative, evocative speaking, a primal telling, wherein we aim to involve the voice in an original singing of the world” (van Manen, 1990, p. 13). To do phenomenology is to understand that lived experience is always more complicated than we can reveal. Van Manen articulated this idea, “[t]o *do* hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal” (1990, p. 18, author’s italics). In this sense my aim was to bring arts-based research and phenomenology together to deepen and enrich my exploration of play in older women’s everyday lives, understanding that I can never know it fully.

## **Being Informed by Feminist Gerontological Researchers**

Although my research is not feminist research, I could not help but be influenced by the feminist researchers I was engaging with in my reading. There is no one way to do feminist research, and feminist researchers utilize multiple methodologies and methods (Hesse-Beiber, 2012; Reinharz, 1992b). Women's experience is placed at the centre of knowledge building and inspiring change (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Thus my study, through the use of phenomenology and arts-based methods with an eye to how the women's stories might trigger change, followed this tradition.

By taking a feminist approach, feminist gerontology encompasses and morphs together concepts from feminism and applies them to ageing (Browne, 1998). Browne stated,

[a] feminist age analysis examines and critiques the underlying premises behind paradigms, policies, and programs that impact older women's lives, suggests a number of strategies to improve the lives of older women, and ultimately, looks to a new epistemology of women and age for more respectful visions for women—and men—in the later years (1998, p. xxxv).

More than just adding older women and men to the mix, feminist gerontology expands and develops “new concepts and views about what constitutes being old and the aging process” (Maynard et al., 2008, p. 40).

Feminist gerontology builds on the traditions and goals of feminism and seeks to make older women's lives visible and to create a space for older women to speak for themselves. Garner (1999) explained “[f]eminist gerontologists facilitate the processes of older women learning to care about themselves as valuable human beings and to become empowered” (p. 7). Ray (1996) claimed feminist gerontology is an active study with and for older people, she explained that feminist gerontology:

works to change attitudes that construct older people's positions in society through restrictive roles, beliefs, and stereotypes. The goal of such scholarship is to assist in liberating elders, especially women, from these stereotypes and to increase their personal

and political agency. Further, ... it challenges what counts as knowledge of aging, who makes this knowledge, and how it functions in the world (p. 675).

Feminism and gerontology share a pragmatic mandate to improve the lives of women and older people. “Feminists and gerontologists seek to ‘deconstruct’ and ‘reconstruct’ misleading myths and misconceptions about women and older adults via research, education, and political struggle” (Browne, 1998, p. xxv). This called me to take action with the knowledge I gain. How that action is shaped continues to unfold as my journey evolves this thesis. For instance, on the academic front, I will seek to publish this work in peer refereed journals and I am scheduled to present at the Canadian Congress On Leisure Research 2014 and hope to present at the Graduate Association for Recreation and Leisure Studies symposium in May 2014. Politically, I hope to share this research with the municipality where I sourced participants and to engage other municipalities and government agencies with this knowledge. Some of the women who participated in this study have begun similar discussions with their social networks. Finally, since I embarked on this study, I have challenged myself, family, and friends to think about their attitudes about older women, ageing, play, and ageism.

A feminist gerontology perspective aligned with phenomenology because similar to phenomenology, it seeks to place, at the centre, lived experience, albeit in this case—of older women. Being informed by feminist gerontology to create, analyze, interpret, write, and report this study, I was called to be mindful of older women in the development and execution of my research (Reay, 2012). Reay called for feminists to use the 3R’s—recognition, respect, and response—in considering difference. It is with these thoughts in mind that I embark on a discussion of the methods I employed in my study.

Key characteristics of feminist methodology include:

1. asking questions that tackle subjugated knowledge;

2. feminists challenge and consider issues of power, authority, ethics, and reflexivity;
3. feminists seeks social change and transformation

(Hesse-Biber, 2012).

In this study, I took up the question of older women and play. The paucity of research in this area is in stark contrast to the infusion of play into the everyday lives of older women perhaps underscoring the marginalization of older women. I struggled with issues of power and authority in the women's lives, perhaps as the women themselves did. With no mention of feminism, yet acknowledged gendered expectations impacting these women's lives, I struggled with how to articulate what role patriarchal power and authority had. Still, the marginalization older women felt because of the age was poignant and clear. Finally, as a feminist researcher, I seek change in society, and as Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2012) wrote, "[r]esearch is political work, and knowledge building is aimed toward empowerment, action, and ultimately, social transformation" (p. 183).

## **Methods**

A prelude: I conducted four arts-based focus groups with older women.

### **Participant recruitment and description.**

Nineteen women between the ages of 63 and 95 years participated in this study. The ages of the women were relatively consistent with the ages of older women in many of the play studies I examined. For instance, the women in Heuser's (2005) study of older women lawn bowlers were 64 to 88; the Raging Grannies in Sawchuk's (2009) study were 45 to 81; and Yarnal's (2006) study of Red Hatters were 50 to 85. Aside from age and gender, a diversity of participants was involved in the study. I spoke with women who played a lot, some others who

played less, and one woman who perceived herself not to play at all. My recruitment material asked for participants to *discuss* play, and did not specifically seek women who *do* play.

My participant recruitment strategy focused on using local regional programs for older adults in a mid-sized community in Southern Ontario. While I developed and used a variety of recruitment strategies including email, posters, and letters (please see Appendix N), these proved to be not particularly effective in recruiting participants.

I was connected with a supervisor, leisure programs – senior services in the community who provided me with feedback about some women’s reticence to participate in my study. Foremost, many women were hesitant to come to a university due to their unfamiliarity with the facilities and parking. To allay this concern, we decided to conduct the focus groups at community centres familiar to the women. Secondly, women also had confusion and uncertainty about what a study about older women’s play might entail, so the supervisor, leisure programs – senior services invited me to speak to two groups of older adults about my research project. After speaking to the groups, a number of women indicated a willingness to participate in my study. I was then informed that more women had heard about my project and were interested in participating. The women in my study came as individuals; however, the women in each focus group had varying degrees of familiarity with each other having participated in recreational groups in the community.

Seventeen of the nineteen women completed a background survey at the end of the focus group. A summary of their self-described background is charted in Appendix E. All of the seventeen women had been married, about half were widows, and one woman was divorced. All but one woman had children, most of these women were now grandmothers. Some had university education and others did not finish high school. Many of the women worked outside

the home, some after their children attended school full-time. All were retired from paid employment; several continued to volunteer outside the home in a variety of capacities (e.g., with older adults, in the church, school lunch programs). Most of the women were White, several were Black, many were born here, several were born there (e.g., England, Holland, Nigeria, Jamaica, and India). There were two women who wrote that they struggled with mental health issues. Some appeared to me to be physically fit and others not so much. One woman used a wheel chair, another arrived on her bicycle. If my focus group was a playground, so many engaging, interesting, and unique playmates joined me at the park! After my last focus group, I wrote this free flowing reflection about the women:

Caring	Loving	Giving		
Friends	mothers	grandmothers		
Challenging				
Angry				
activist				
	Kibitzer	quiet		
winking				
a little angel in her				
Soulful				
missing: friends, husbands, parents		children		who are gone
Singing...Dancing....Writing....creating				
artists				
Intelligent	thoughtful			
Funny				
Immigrants				
Widows				
Divorced				
Married				
Feminist	sort of	not so much		absolutely
determined				
Apprehensive				
	I'm not old			
	I am old			
Thriving				
Healthy	mostly			
Joyful				
layered				
Orchestra				



Cacophony  
Peaceful  
(June 25, 2014)

**Data collection strategies.**

Data was collected in five ways during this project including focus groups discussions, the art the women created, the notes the women wrote on their handouts, my observations as the art was created, and through my reflections. I also included a written reflection from an older woman who was not available to attend the focus groups but who left me a note about play in her life. Each of these methods of data collection informed my findings, discussions, and conclusions.

**Focus groups.**

Play naturally lends itself to a social situation, so I decided to conduct my research through focus groups. In a group situation, the research space becomes a more social and fluid environment (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). As the study of lived experiences, focus groups were well suited to phenomenology as the social context allowed “women to connect with each other collectively, share their own experiences” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p 893). Daly (2007) suggested phenomenologists can interview a range of people experiencing the same phenomenon, making focus groups an appropriate research method to use in a phenomenological study. Consistent with the phenomenologist’s desire to capture the everyday, natural lived experiences of people, focus groups were a synergistic method to play with play.

Feminist researchers prefer a focus group method because they are less artificial or contrived compared to one-to-one research (Bryman et al., 2009). The authors argued women can exercise more control and even ownership of the discussion. I sensed the women felt empowered through the discussion, for instance, at times directing and leading the discussion. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) suggested feminists have used focus groups to understand

and use women's experiences to enact change. Hence, I felt a focus group method was suitable for my study of older women.

Focus groups reduce the power and authority of the researcher (Bryman et al., 2009; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). Compared to one-to-one interviews, the researcher is one voice among many. A multiplicity of views and voices were heard in the focus groups allowing the women and I to clarify and interrogate meanings and experiences together. Focus groups are an efficient method of research with groups of people generating large volumes of information relatively quickly (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). In a group situation, there are naturally multiple lines of communication (Kamberelis & Dimitriadas, 2005). As I set out to conduct my focus groups I recognized that it might be a challenge for me to let the conversation unfold and develop in the way the women want it to while still achieving my research objectives. Our conversations did meander, but rather than be problematic I experienced the windings to be more organic.

Establishing an open, comfortable, secure environment where the women could be who they were was essential as I strove to follow van Manen's (1990) advice and find out what play and playfulness was *really* like in their everyday lives. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) pointed out that focus groups are safe spaces, but of course this may not always be so. Thus it was important for me to make certain the environment felt safe for the women. Two underlying factors helped to readily establish safety. First, the women were familiar with each other prior to the focus groups given their mutual participation in city programming. Second, lending credibility and adding weight to the study, it was approved by and adhered to the university's ethics guidelines. Further, I reinforced the voluntary nature of the woman's participation, that they were free to come and go as they like and were welcome to participate and answer questions

as they chose. I also reinforced that there were no right or wrong answers to our discussions. I believe that the women sensed my empathy for them and passion for the topic and that this contributed to feelings of safety and ease.

I experienced our focus group conversation as synergistic with the women building, reflecting, and challenging each other throughout the discussion (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). As I set out to conduct my focus groups I hoped group conversations might stimulate memories; or draw out different aspects of play an individual might not have otherwise considered (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). This was the case as one woman's story often inspired another's, or at other times someone's meaning sparked disagreement among the group.

An important but under represented and under reported aspect of focus groups is that they “capitalize on the richness and complexity of group dynamics” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 903). The comfort and familiarity among the women complicated (e.g., preconceived notions about each other) and enhanced (e.g., cut through social norms) the group's interplay and helped me make sense of the data. The dynamic allowed individual women to interrogate their meanings and experiences as they challenged and/or reinforced each other. For instance, a conversation about ageing—how some felt the same as they always had and others felt quite different—might not have occurred if the women were not familiar and comfortable with each other. During the arts project the dynamic between the women was fascinating, as was the difference in the vibe from group to group.

During the focus groups, I initiated a reflective play experience through an arts-based activity (discussed in the focus group process below; also see Appendix A, Discussion Guide for details). In my search for authentic, deep descriptions of play and playfulness, I was driven by van Manen's (1990) direction, “[t]he best way to enter a person's lifeworld is to participate in it”

(p. 69). At the same time, I was mindful of Cohen's (1993) highly critical perspective of the research on child's play—that it is set up and controlled by adults. In this context I strove to minimize the sense that play in the focus group was contrived and completely controlled by me as the researcher, and by having a variety of art supplies and an openness to expression and participation, I feel I accomplished this goal.

### **Focus group process.**

The focus groups were two to just under three hours each, sufficiently long to enable a deep conversation and participation in a reflective arts-based play experience. I hosted the groups at two different facilities owned by the municipality, places where the women were involved in programming.

### ***Room set up.***

I set up the room to encourage dialogue and comfort and strove to create a setting that facilitated play and felt playful. We sat at individual square tables pushed together. There was ample space to engage in our conversation and do the art. Paper and pens were placed at each seat, and I had bowls of candy (for colour and eating) and water bottles for refreshment at the table. A few different sized balls, tactile materials (e.g., desk toys) imbued the space with colour and texture. I placed markers, highlighters, and crayons on the table too.

As the facilitator, it was my responsibility to cultivate a conversation with the groups. While I saw myself as an active member of the conversation, I tried to not intrude or take over the discussion. I tried to involve all of the women and guarded against isolating any of the women, and encouraged a safe environment that allowed a diversity of opinions and avoided group think (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). I was also mindful of women who sometimes dominated the conversation and was sensitive to bringing women into the dialogue who might

not easily share their experiences (Bryman et al., 2009). The art played an important role by creatively and actively involving the women in reflection. The majority of the women participated in the arts-play and as I highlight later (see page 90) even those who did not partake, involved themselves by chatting and interacting with the other women. Through the show and tell discussion, each woman shared her rendering with the group, and those that did not create a rendering talked about a play experience or what play was like in their everyday life—in essence, they shared their stories of play. The women seemed to be quite democratic as all contributed to our dialogues. At times, I engaged a particular women if they either had not contributed or seemed to want to talk.

When the topics are sensitive, Bryman and colleagues (2009) cautioned to be wary of people holding socially acceptable viewpoints and to probe for potentially different public versus private perspectives. While this did not seem to be the case for our topic, play and playfulness, at times, the context of our discussions was sensitive. For example, there were differences in opinions about being older women, and what impact that had on their lives. I provided a range of ways for participants to share their perspectives, and this allowed the women to speak in the way that they wanted. After I introduced each segment of the focus group, I provided the women a hardcopy handout of the questions we would explore. The handouts were simply given as an alternative format to facilitate our discussion, a space for the women to jot down their thoughts, if they wished. At the end of the focus groups, I collected any handouts the woman gave me. I heeded Bryman et al.'s advice and noted in the conversation (and even the artwork) when people spoke in generalities (i.e., 'we') rather than specifics (i.e., 'I').

### ***Introductions.***

Each focus group began with introductions. The purpose of the introductions was to provide information about the focus group process, the research project, and myself. I also fulfilled the university's ethics requirements for this study. An important aim of the introduction was to establish a safe and relaxed environment. First, I introduced myself and my research project. I did this verbally and in writing (Appendix B, Information Handout). I introduced myself as a master's student in recreation and leisure studies. I explained the overall goal for my research was to explore the experiences and meanings of play and playfulness for older women, and the place of play in their day-to-day lives. I estimated how much time the focus group would take and broadly outlined what we would do during the focus group (talk, do some art, and tell our stories). I also gave the women an agenda for the focus group (Appendix F).

I reinforced verbally, and through written consent, that participation in the focus groups was voluntary, and that people could leave or chose not to participate at any time (see Appendix C for a copy of the consent form). I explained that the session would be audio recorded and that I would take notes during the focus groups. I reminded participants that their responses would be held in strict confidence and personal identification would not be divulged. I asked the women to do the same and not share any information about the other participants outside the focus groups. I reinforced that I wanted to ensure the focus group felt safe for all participants. I explained that there were no right or wrong answers in our conversation, and that I valued different experiences, perspectives, and opinions. I then asked the participants, "what do you need from me or each other to ensure this space feels safe for you?"

The introduction took between ten to twenty minutes, depending on the group and its size. In the next phase of introductions, the participants introduced themselves. Because some

of the women knew each other, this activity took less time than I anticipated, about ten to twenty minutes. I placed a piece of folded paper in front of each participant and asked them to write their first name on it. In the first group, I also asked each person to jot down a word or an image that was associated with the word play or playfulness for them. Subsequently, I did not repeat this exercise with the other focus groups as it caused the discussion on play to begin too early, before the women and I were comfortable in the environment. At the beginning of the other groups, I asked the participants to share something about themselves. Each woman had a few minutes to introduce herself, and I did the same.

*Arts-based reflective activity.*

The next step in the focus group process was participation in an arts-based reflective activity. The purpose of this activity was to encourage the women to think about play and playfulness on a personal level, and engage in an arts-play experience. I asked the participants to think about a recent play experience or time they were being playful in their day-to-day lives. In doing so, I asked them to consider these questions: What is happening? Where are you? Who are you with? How do you feel? How is time experienced? How is the space experienced? I asked the women to participate in reflection about their play through creative expression. I advised the participants that they would have approximately 20 to 30 minutes to create a rendering that reflected this play or playful experience. I suggested to the participants that they could create a collage, draw a picture, do a doodling, sculpture, write a reflection, a poem, a story, an anagram—that they could create anything at all. I reminded the participants that the theme of their rendering was play and playfulness in their day-to-day lives, what play means to them, how they feel when at play. I also suggested the rendering could be about play experiences they have had in the past, or something more recent. I had magazines, pictures,

words, bits of odds and ends like pipe cleaners, scraps of fabric, markers, papers, play doh, stickers, paint, interesting paper, tape, scissors, and glue for the participants to use. I reinforced that the pieces were about play in their lives, and that I was not interested in their artistic sensibility or ability. To ensure the women understood the activity, I provided a handout posing the questions they might think about as they created their artistic reflections of play (please see Appendix G).

During the arts-play reflective activity, I had planned to observe the participants using a guide with promptings about the lifeworld existentials (see Appendix J for the observations guide). In the first group, I immediately realized that would not be appropriate. The atmosphere was much more personal, and it would have set me apart from the women. Instead I recorded my impressions on the observations guide immediately following the focus group. Two paradoxes of play—as quiet and rowdy, social and solitary—was immediately evident. Each group seemed to have its own mood and tempo. Some women jotted down their ideas about play before they started the activity while others walked over to the arts supply table to stimulate their thinking. Some women worked together, others side-by-side, and others independently.

A summary of my impressions as I wrote them on the guide is found on Appendix K. The first group included five women. While none were friends, all were familiar faces to each other. Three of the five women immediately set out to work on the exercise, perusing the supply table, picking up material, and beginning their projects. One woman was not sure where to begin and upon seeing reminders of Christmas set to work on her rendering. There was one woman who was visibly stressed at the beginning of the arts activity. She expressed her concern about her lack of artistic ability and uncertainty about what play meant to her. As she chatted with the



other women and me, she visibly relaxed and decided to create a collage including magazine pictures and jotted down words about her play.

Two woman friends and a third woman only just familiar to the other two made up the second group. All were part of a city run exercise group. This group was very slow to start the arts activity; we had a lengthy discussion about what play might mean, for older women, for themselves. I experienced a real gentleness and warmth between the women, and a sense of playfulness with this group. I believe the women experienced the space as relaxed, as they chatted easily with each other, and shared ideas about their renderings as they created them.

The third focus group was with the “crafters”; women who meet on a regular basis to create charitable and non-charitable handmade gifts (e.g., knit baby outfits to donate). The women seemed to know to each other fairly well, and I sensed they shared varying degrees of companionship and friendship. With eight participants, we met in a large, shared physical space. In addition to the nine of us, a woman with autism and her caregiver who are regular part of the “crafters” group also sat at our table (neither elected to participate in the focus group). At the other side of the room, there was a group of older women playing cards. The space was lively, fun, and noisy without being distracting. This group interacted together, chatted, gathered input and materials from each other. One woman baked snacks and shared them with the group. Two women in this group chose not to participate in the arts activity. One woman loved to cook and perused the cookbooks I had provided as possible materials. This woman chatted with those around her about her love of cooking. The second woman just relaxed and talked with the women sitting on both sides of her. I believe both women were comfortable and at ease; they simply chose not to participate in the arts activity.

The last group included three women. This group was quiet throughout the activity, writing, drawing, and collaging about play in their lives. These women gathered their materials, developed their play reflections individually, and they stayed in their seats once they began their art projects. Although the physical set-up of the room was consistent with the others, the vibe was much different—serious, almost intense, solitary, and silent.

The renderings were personal and varied; they are peppered throughout this thesis (see page 9 for a list of artful reflections). A few examples, a woman penned a lovely vignette and another painted a water colour. Several women created collages, a woman made a tissue paper flower, another made a bookmark, a wooden plaque was decorated by one woman, and another drew a picture using oil pastels. Most of the women gave me their renderings, and I photographed the renderings of those who chose to keep them. One woman's rendering prominently showed her name, so I have not pictured it. The arts-based reflective activity took 30 to 45 minutes, and I usually had to cut the activity off.

### ***“Show and tell.”***

The purpose of our “show and tell” activity was for the women to share their personal reflections. To get the dialogue started I said, “I invite you to share your reflections of play or playfulness with us.” I continued the discussions with questions like, “What is depicted in your piece? What does play mean to you? How do you experience play? How were you feeling when you were creating the art? Was this activity play for you, or not play? How so? How did you experience time during the activity? How did you experience your surroundings, the room, the material, being in a group with other women? How did it feel to express yourself in this way?” I provided the women with a handout outlining questions to consider as they shared their reflections with the group (see Appendix H). The handout also included questions to think about

as we considered the group's reflections together. To involve everyone in this segment, I asked the two women who did not participate in the arts activity to share a play experience.

After each woman had shared her reflection, I expressed gratitude for the participants' reflections. To look for and stimulate a discussion about themes across the renderings I asked, "What themes or commonalities did you see in our groups' reflections of play and playfulness?" The show and tell activity took 30 to 40 minutes.

*Open dialogue about play and playfulness.*

Show and tell then segued into a broader discussion about play and playfulness. The purpose of this discussion was to probe more deeply into the meanings, experiences, and place of play and playfulness in the day-to-day lives of the women. During this discussion we covered other issues we had not yet discussed. We talked specifically to playfulness, the challenges to play, and the place of play in the women's day-to-day lives. I asked the women questions like, "How does play differ from being playful for you? How are you playful in your everyday life? What does being playful mean to you?"

As we moved along in the discussion, I probed the women's experiences of play using the following questions: What might your reflections and meaning of play say about you as a woman? How does being a woman affect your play and ability to play or be playful? What might your reflections and meanings of play say about you as you age? How does being an older woman affect your ability to play or be playful? What role might play have in challenging stereotypes of women/older women? What other challenges prevent or limit your ability to play and play the way you would like to play? What type of things effect your ability to play or be playful in the way you would like to in your day-to-day life?"

Finally, we discussed the place of play and playfulness in the everyday lives of the women. I asked questions like, “How has your play changed over the years? What place or role does play have in your day-to-day life today?” I gave the women a last opportunity to share any unsaid thoughts about play and playfulness in their lives, I asked, “What else would you like to tell me about play or playfulness in your everyday life?” To facilitate our discussion, I provided the women with a handout posing these questions along with space for the women to jot down their thoughts (see Appendix I). This open discussion took 45 to 60 minutes. Following the open discussion of play, I asked the women for their feedback about the focus group.

### ***Feedback.***

Through written feedback and a discussion with the women about the focus group process, I gained insight into what this experience was like for the women. To facilitate reflection, I asked the participants to fill out a personal reflection (see Appendix L). I asked the participants to answer these questions, “What was this experience like for you? What worked? What did not work for you? What, if anything, has changed for you? How might we use this information to challenge the ways older women are understood in society? What suggestions do you have for me?” In the larger group, we talked more than wrote as many of the women did not want to write out their feedback. The women’s feedback helped me improve from one focus group to the next and will certainly inform my process down the road as I conduct further research. At the same time, I completed a similar reflection (see Appendix M). Once the women completed their personal reflections, using the questions as a springboard, we had a group discussion. After our discussion was finished, I asked the women for their sheets and pointed out to the women they were welcome to sign the reflection sheet or not. We took 10 to 20 minutes to complete the feedback session. Concurrent with completing feedback on the focus

group, I asked the women to complete a background demographic survey (see Appendix D for the survey and Appendix E for the summary).

### ***Ending.***

In this section, I brought the focus groups to a close and thanked the women (please note, see Appendix O for a copy of the thank you note I gave the women). I asked the women if they had any last questions or comments about the project. I described how the participants could be involved in the research process in the future. Specifically, I told the women that I would provide them a written summary of the focus group discussion in a few months (see Appendix P for the letter I sent and Appendix Q for a copy of the summary). At the first group one of the women suggested that along with the women from the other focus group, we get together again to discuss my findings summary. I provided the participants with my contact information and invited them to contact me if they wanted to discuss any aspect of their involvement or my project further. We spent about 10 minutes wrapping up our focus group. In total, the focus groups were between two and three hours.

### **Analysis**

Different types of data—artistic renderings, focus group discussions, the women’s notes on the handouts, my observations, and my own reflections on the process—added richness and texture to the information I collected. There is not one prescribed method for analyzing phenomenological research, as Giorgi (2009) wrote, “[u]nfortunately, a thorough and consistent explication of the phenomenological theory of science is not yet a historical achievement” (p. 11). Seeking, in Giorgi’s words, a “proper qualitative method for psychology” since the early 1960s, he sought to understand, practice, and explicate the phenomenological method (2009, p.

xi). I was the welcome recipient of his detailed work and examples. In addition, I was deeply influenced by van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic, humanistic approach to phenomenology.

The basic structure for my analysis was broadly executed according to Giorgi's four essential steps for data analysis including: reading for a sense of the whole, determination of meaning units, transformation of participants' words into phenomenologically sensitive expressions, and writing the structure or essence of the experience. I quickly realized that my analysis required flexibility, starting, stopping, re-starting, reviewing, revisiting of the literature and data, and openness to struggle and discovery.

The focus groups were audio recorded and I began my analysis process by transcribing them into Word documents. I experienced the transcription as a labour intensive, difficult, and slow process. Particularly with the large group, I found it challenging to hear our conversation as there were often two or even three people speaking at the same time. In order to get the audio tapes transcribed more quickly, I paid for a service to transcribe one of the four audiotapes. I reviewed this final transcript against the audiotape to check for accuracy.

Once the transcripts were done, I read them for a sense of the whole. As a phenomenological study I aimed to read the transcripts with sensitivity to the intended meaning of the participants (Giorgi, 2009). As I read through the transcripts for the first time, I adapted and held versions of van Manen's (1990) questions in my mind—What was the experience of play? Was this a possible example of play? What was play really like for these women? What was being playful like? Drawing on the lifeworld existentials, I asked myself: How was time described when the women were at play? How was space described? How were relationships experienced during play? How was play embodied? I captured my thoughts and understandings

during this phase by highlighting words, phrases, and snippets of conversation that I felt were important. I wrote notes about my thoughts. My intention was to remain topline and big picture.

I read the other data I collected in the same way, for a sense of the whole and with the questions I just outlined in mind. I also gazed and reflected on the artistic renderings the women created during the focus groups, individually and together.

As a second step in the data analysis, I identified meaning units. Giorgi (2009) counseled to simply mark the data each time meaning changes. Giorgi advised this step simply parses the data into manageable segments. I interrogated my observations, reflections, and the art in the same way, dividing the information into meaning units. While lengthy and time consuming, this step in the analysis was relatively straightforward.

To further grasp the meaning units and to begin to transform the women's words into essences, I created a table for each focus group. Across the top, I wrote my research questions: How do older women experience play? What is the meaning of play for older women? How do they describe it? What is playfulness to older women? How do older women play in their everyday lives? What is the significance of play and playfulness in women's everyday lives and in living well? What aspects of women's lives limit or prevent their access to play? I added two columns entitled ageing and being women. On the rows, I wrote the women's names. I wrote notes, ideas, and copied quotes from the women onto the table.

To further analyze, cluster, and reflect on my data, I looked for recurring ideas and concepts in the tables. I printed and cut out ideas and a few quotes (from the women) that stood out and frequently recurred. I placed these on the floor and arranged them into clusters. For example, I grouped comments about playfulness, play as being, play as social and solitary. Together, Sherry and I reflected on the ideas. At Sherry's suggestion, I wrote the ideas and

quotes onto post-it notes and put them on the walls. I was able to work with my data in a tangible way, moving ideas together and apart. I left the post-its on my walls for a couple of weeks as my thinking coalesced.

To decipher and express the underlying meaning in a deep, clear way – to illuminate the essences -- was my central task for the third step. I transformed the meaning units into phenomenologically sensitive expressions and sought to illuminate the essences of the experience. Giorgi (2009) and Daly (2007) counseled me to imagine the opposite or think of experiences that were counter to understand the phenomenon, yet, the women conceived of play often in seemingly opposite and divergent ways, both within the self and across women. This became a challenge for me to comprehend and reconcile the use of free imaginative variation. Giorgi counseled, “one mentally remove an aspect of the phenomenon that is to be clarified in order to see whether the removal transforms what is presented in an essential way” (2009, p. 69). Not exactly relevant advice given the paradoxes I encountered.

Perhaps Giorgi’s most salient advice, to return to and question the data, was most true in my analysis. I moved back and forth between the focus group transcripts, even sometimes returning to the audio tapes themselves, back to my meaning units, all the while trying to hold the whole while considering the parts. For instance, if I felt caught in the minutia of the data, I stopped and gazed at the women’s play renderings, or at other times I listened to snippets of conversations on the audio tapes, other times I reviewed my reflective notes. As I anticipated, this clustering was challenging, thought provoking, lengthy, and time consuming. As I read and reread the expressions, I began to find patterns forming in the data.

I wrote and rewrote about the expressions throughout the analysis and even into the later stages of my thinking as I developed and articulated a deeper sense of the essences and sub-



essences. I clustered meaning units and transformed expressions into similar groupings; trying to determine how different units worked together. Indeed as Giorgi (2009) instructed, it was during this stage of clustering and transformation of meaning units that much of my analytical time was expended.

In my writing I strove to balance Giorgi's (2009) counsel to write with clarity and without jargon while also satisfying Creswell's (2009) call for thick, rich descriptions to articulate my research findings. With a tendency towards being too wordy, I have been challenged by arts-based research's tenet of clear, strong, restrained writing (Neilsen, 2008a). No question, I have been guided by van Manen's (1990) counsel to write and rewrite "[a]nd this took that long to write, you say? After seven drafts!" (p. 8).

Writing has been critical throughout my project, not only in the actual finished product of this thesis, but in the everyday reflection, mulling about, and analysis that this project entailed. Van Manen (1990) said that "hermeneutic phenomenology research is fundamentally a writing activity." Ueland's (1938) words quietly instructed me, "inspiration does not come like a bolt, nor is it kinetic, energetic striving, but it comes into us slowly and quietly and all the time, though we must regularly and every day give it a little chance to start flowing" (p. 42/43). My daily practice of "morning pages" — a reflective, free-flowing journal (Cameron, 2002), fortified my journey throughout this project.

### **My role and reflection on being a researcher.**

My role as the researcher had three fundamental aspects: to benefit and give back to the people I research, to share my knowledge, and to learn and develop personally. My hope for this research was for the women and me to experience the focus groups as a joyful, fun, engaging, and playful space for discovery. I believe this was the case for many of the women, for example,

several suggested we reunite to share my findings. The feedback was positive, the women talked of having fun, enjoying themselves, Claudia said “we could do this every week,” and Anna suggested, “well actually, the city should have more of these things.” Finally, I felt enriched by this experience; privileged that the women shared their stories and heartfelt experiences of play and ageing. I am lucky and touched that women chose to fully participate in my study, and gave freely of themselves.

Dupuis (1999) suggested “qualitative research is a mutual journey between the researcher and researched” (p. 45). I heartily agree and experienced this project as a mutual journey both in the focus groups moment and as I dwelled with the women’s words and art. I consciously included my whole self—emotional and intellectual—throughout the research process. Together with the women, we created a comfortable and safe space for conversation, caring, and sharing together. My sense is that arts-based methods contributed to this feeling of a mutual to and fro as the women were in an easy, open, creative space engendered by the reflective arts activity.

In her conception of the role of the researcher, Finley (2008) suggested we must integrate into the community of participants to initiate introspection and reflection. This thinking urged me to fully engage with the women, to dialogue and communicate at a deep level to unearth, listen to, and share their experiences and meanings of play and playfulness. McNiff (2008) cautioned the skill of the researcher in engaging others in the process will have a significant impact on the research. I strove to adhere to McNiff’s other piece of advice: be strong in methods and spontaneous, flexible, free, and creative in application and expression.

As Dupuis (1999) advised: write in the first person. Ironically, I have come full circle. In 1990 as a freshly hired product manager, I penned my first important document, key findings about what it felt like to live with back pain according to four focus groups of women. Behind

the glass I listened attentively. I carefully thought about the women's experiences and stories; I considered what I already understood about pain. I wrote with insight as I gently recanted their stories. The paper was returned to me, seemingly full of red ink. It shouted: do not write in the first person! I am challenged and exhilarated to once again write in *my* voice!

Van Manen (1990) asked us to consider how we are oriented when we do a phenomenological study. I am oriented as a leisure studies student profoundly interested in women's ageing and living well through play. As you know, I love play and ageing is an emerging and salient reality for me at 53.

Throughout my study, I strove to be self-reflective and self-critical (e.g., Morin, 2008; Reay, 2012). Educated by feminist gerontologist, I was called to pay attention to and be vigilant in my practice of reflexivity—to be aware of myself and my impact on the research (DeVault & Gross, 2012; Hesse-Biber, 2012; Reay, 2012). I have been challenged to examine and question my potentially ageist biases. In turn, as a feminist researcher I sought to find my voice, expressed my thoughts, feelings, and experiences about the process itself and my learning as I went along through writing and art-inspired reflection (e.g., Dupuis, 1999; Jipson & Paley, 2008; Piirto, 2002). As Dupuis advised, I strove to relate and connect the personal with the research topic. I have continued to seek, comprehend, and account for my impact on the research (Granville, 2000).

I wrote a summary of my research findings designed to communicate and share my understanding of the experience, meaning, and place of play and playfulness of older women (see Appendix Q). I emailed or sent by post summaries to all of the women who participated in the focus group. I also emailed the summary to the supervisor, leisure programs – senior services so that she could disseminate it to the women participants if the opportunity arose. My

findings resonated with the women, and the process provided some hope for them. For example, after she reviewed the findings, Christine sent me an email about challenging ageism.

Karla,

Thanks for the summary of older women and 'play'.

One question that you asked at the end was "How might we use this info to challenge society's images and understandings of older women?"

I would say that it may be difficult because for decades society has revered youth and think of older people more of a burden than anything. Maybe doing research like you are doing could change perception somehow. I would love to see society change the image of older women - that would be awesome!

Christine

I also met with a group of three women to review their impressions of my findings. The women affirmed my findings, and spoke about their own conversation after the focus group, Virginia said, "Charlotte and I talked about this play thing one time I remember. You know, that's the challenge you have with this. Because it's very complex." At the same time at the beginning of our discussion, Virginia offered this perspective,

I think playing is more of a doing. I was just thinking. Can you just sit on the couch doing nothing and be playing? I suppose in your mind you could be playing with ideas and memories and words, you know, things like that. But I associate playing more with a doing. (Connie: yeah). Like I play solitaire a lot. That's a solitary playfulness obviously. I enjoy that because it's also mentally stimulating for me because I've figured out there are ways of actually winning solitaire. You have to really work at it. See there's the word work. While I'm playing, I'm working. Right? And yeah. So I don't know. I'm not being very clear am I?

I believe Virginia was quite clear—play is a doing—yet as she aptly identified, play is *not* a singular notion. Play's complexity is evident!

The phenomenologist must be clear and transparent in method to guide other scientists and build knowledge (Giorgi, 2009). As I have undertaken my analysis, I documented my process so that I could report on it for others to comprehend and critique my work. Put together, this is what I had hoped to accomplish in my study, clarity in method, transparency in my role as

the researcher, and resonance between my words and the women, all the while knowing my words are an opening, a window on the experience and meaning of play and playfulness in the lives of older women. As Neilsen (2008b) exclaimed, “[m]ove the audience to understanding, insight, and enjoyment” (p. 389). If you, my reader are pondering play and older women more than before or in a different way when you are finished reading my thesis, and most critically, if the women themselves felt something, I am grateful!

*Reflexivity in my analytic practice.*

Reflexivity was critical and influential in my analysis. I used my reflections as a way to question myself, the data, and my findings. I would characterize my modus operation as a researcher as one full of self-doubt which at times hampered my ability to get this project done. At the same time, I was conscious of my own need to develop and understand at a pace that suited me. For instance, in learning about the literature, I constantly needed to reread and look-up words that I could not even pronounce, let alone comprehend. Struggling to make sense of and explain my understanding of theories, sometimes I felt like my voice and my opinion were either nonexistent or overshadowed.

Creswell (2007) explained a phenomenological analysis should begin with a full, personal description of my experience of the phenomenon. I began this step during the first term of my MA (fall 2011) and continued to reflect on play in my life, in thought, in writing, and in practice (see page 10).

I also engaged in arts-play reflective practice throughout my research process. For instance, as I prepared for my thesis proposal presentation, I created a collage (see Appendix R). As I read my collage, I discovered areas where I felt most vulnerable (for example, my discomfort in naming myself a feminist and my uncertainty about the significance and

contribution of my research). Despite having attended dozens of focus groups (in a past career, as an observer “behind the glass”), I was apprehensive about facilitating my own groups, so to prepare, I role played. My usual response to feeling nervous is to speak quickly, and assume others are on the same page as I am, so I imagined myself in the focus group moment. Several times, in front of a mirror, and again in my car as I drove the hour and a half to the group, I rehearsed, aloud, each phase of my plan. As I wrote in my morning pages on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013, “... giving instruction before the play/art activity. It’s important for me to keep it simple, be clear,” and I explicitly reminded myself to “take a breath, *pause*.” In another instance as I analyzed how I perceived arts-based methods impacted communication between the women and me during the focus groups, I created a doodling (see Appendix S). I noticed that my doodles did not contain ears, so I wondered, what was my listening like, was I as fully attuned, what have I missed? I went back to my audio recordings, and I listened to the voices of the women in sections where I felt uneasy. I used these deliberate acts of reflection as reflexive tools to interrogate myself as a researcher before I undertook new aspects of this project.

In the fall of 2013 as I struggled to articulate what *I* thought about the themes and essences, I created a collage. Without intentional focus on this project, I wrote a favourite Mark Twain quote on the board, “[c]ourage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear – not absence of fear.” This thought propelled, and I called Elaine van Melle, a longtime friend and kindred spirit—a woman like me who returned to graduate school at mid-life. Elaine and I talked, and I shared my big picture perspective of the findings. I mapped out a concrete next step that resulted in a strong, one page articulation of what I believed about this study (see Appendix T). I took this summary to my meeting with Sherry the next day.

To interpret and illuminate the women's experiences and meanings of play at the intersection of age and gender, I tried to reach beyond and behind the women's words and art through attention and gentle questioning during the focus groups and afterwards through my own written and visual reflections. I scribbled these two word doodlings shortly after the second focus group. Later the renderings served as respite from my analysis, when I felt frustrated or needed uplifting, they were a reminder of what the study was about—real, live women.



I am aware that my positive perspective of play might impact my findings. Indeed I was reminded of that upon acceptance of my abstract for presentation at the Canadian Congress on Leisure Research 2014. One of the reviewers wrote, “[i]t seems apparent that the author(s) have a passion and insight into this topic. However, it should not supersede the data when presenting results” (J. F. Singelton, personal communication, February 8, 2014). I received this timely feedback just as I was about to meet with a group of the women to review my findings, so I asked the women if my positive perception of play might have precluded any negativity they might have about play. Charlotte was incredulous, “[y]ou think it has a negative side?” Virginia paused for a moment and responded,

Yes actually I do. I can see that. Not so much, well, yeah. If you play all the time, as an older person then actually are you an old child or something? Like, you can't play your

whole life away. There are people that do that. They just play play play play play. They play at life and they don't take anything seriously.

After some disagreement between the women, Virginia proposed, “[s]o too much play without that balance of responsibility and productivity is also a negative thing I would say.”

### **Assessing this Study**

Guided by deWitt and Ploeg's (2006) recommendations for assessing rigour in an interpretive phenomenological study, I assessed my work. Five key elements were examined in this assessment: balanced integration, openness, concreteness, resonance, and actualization (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006). I perceived the strengths of my study to be openness, resonance, and actualization. I sensed improvements could be made in the area of concreteness, and I assessed my area of weakness to be in balanced integration.

Openness was a strength of this study. I explicitly described my methods including the reasons behind the decisions I made. For example I employed arts-based methods because I believed the topic of play lent itself to art, and I anticipated the arts would evoke empathy, create a space suited to a feminist gerontology, and build knowledge. Based on the feedback I have received from the women in this study, I believe I achieved a communion and resonance with them on both the topic and being participants in a research study. Given this study contained work in emerging areas (i.e., older women's play and arts-based methods with older women); I believe there is potential actualization for this study.

I perceived the weakest area of my study to be in balanced integration, a synthesis of the voice of study participants and a philosophical explanation underpinning the findings from the study (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006). While I was quite comfortable in my interpretation of the meaning and experience of play in the women's day-to-day lives, I was uneasy about my ability to apply what I was reading in the literature about feminist gerontology to the study's findings. I



had some confidence in applying strategies used in feminist gerontology research during the moment of the focus group, for example, I felt comfortable putting the women's voice at the centre of the study. Rather it was my lack of knowledge and familiarity in the theory of feminist gerontology that hindered my ability to skillfully apply the lens to my interpretation of the findings.

Finally I believe there remains an opportunity to improve concreteness for the future development of this work. Drawing on van Manen (1990), DeWitt and Ploeg (2006) suggested that concreteness has two elements, that the work "situate the reader concretely in the context of this phenomenon and also link with experiences in their lifeworld" (p. 225). DeWitt and Ploeg interpreted this to mean creating knowledge that is useful for practice. In this study, I believe I have satisfied the first part of the criteria, but not yet the latter.

I abided by the spirit and rules of the University of Waterloo's research ethics. I received informed consent from each of the research participants (see Appendix C). I used pseudonyms throughout my thesis to protect the privacy of the women in this study (Creswell, 2009). Ultimately as the research instrument (Creswell, 2009) I am accountable for my work (Martin-Alcoff, 2009). Martin Alcoff advised the researcher to be aware of the effect words might have on research participants. With this principle in mind, I strove to be mindful of the experiences and journeys women sometimes undertake as they age. To my knowledge and based on my participation, observations, follow-up with the women and the supervisor leisure programs – senior services, there were no problems or incidences of concern that arose as a result of the groups.

## **Summary**

This chapter outlined the methodology and methods I used for my study. Using phenomenology I explored and interpreted the lived experiences, meanings, and place of play and playfulness in the day-to-day lives of older women. To foster play in the focus groups, I chose to integrate arts-based methods as a way to assist the women in reflecting on and experiencing play and being playful in the context of the focus groups. I described the different types of data I gathered including focus groups discussions, the participants' art, the women's notes, my observations during the focus groups, and my own reflections. My process for analysis was also detailed and described. The chapter continued with a discussion of my role as researcher and how I used reflexivity in my analysis. In the next chapter I outline my interpretation of what play and playfulness means, how it is experienced, and its place in the day-to-day lives of older women.

#### **Chapter Four: Digging for Gold—Complex and Paradoxical Findings in the Funhouse**

The purpose of my study was to explore the experience and meaning of play and playfulness for older women, and its place in their day-to-day lives. In discussion with groups of older women, hearing their stories and sharing their artful reflections of play in their lives and upon my analysis and reflection, as well as reflections with Sherry, my family and friends, I found play to be a wonderful, complex, and paradoxical phenomenon for older women. Indeed one woman felt that she did not experience “play” in her life at all, at least from her perspective. A couple others needed to reframe and redefine their concept of play to think about what play might be or could be in their lives. It is no wonder one of the most common refrains in the play research is how difficult or elusive play is to define! Throughout this study, pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of the women.

As a phenomenological study of the lived experience of play, older women described their play experiences in three interconnected ways: as a doing, a feeling, and a being. Women may experience play in one of these ways or in each of these ways—at once or all at the same time. This overlapping, intersecting idea of play was experienced within individuals and across the women.

Playfulness and play were closely aligned and the women struggled to articulate how play and playfulness were different. I discovered playfulness was often embodied through “being play,” and, it was frequently expressed by being silly or having fun. Sometimes playfulness could have a negative aspect to it—perceived as teasing or a quality with a slightly mean edge.

Beneath the overarching experience of play as a doing, a feeling, and a being were meanings and experiences that clustered around these seemingly paradoxical sub essences about play as:

- Time flies by and time slows down
- Productive and unproductive
- Social and solitary
- Serious and silly

I examined older women's play informed by feminist gerontology, thus I aimed to be sensitive to the challenges and opportunities that contextualized older women's play. I came to understand how women's ability to play in the way that they would like is challenged and enhanced by health issues, and in particular I sensed a potential threat of health decline looming in the distance for some. Being lonely had a profound impact on some women's ability to play in the way that they would like. Normative roles or society's expectations for women have been internalized by some and that had an influence on how some experience play. Notions about ageing also influenced how some women experienced play in their day-to-day lives, even to the extent that one woman felt that she did *not* play. Alternatively being of a certain age gave some women more time to engage and renew their play. Ageism is a critical issue and reality experienced by many of these women, yet I sensed the women found ways to rise above ageism.

My findings reflect a generally positive view of play. This is a mirror of my own attitude towards play and playfulness. Perhaps the women sensed my bias; perchance I led our conversations in that direction. I imagine another researcher looking at my raw data—our focus group transcripts and the women's creative reflections of play—might find much of what I did; however, another researcher might have taken the discussions down other roads and discovered different parkettes and roundabouts. Without visibly obvious constraints to play, the women in my study characterized themselves as mostly healthy and well and appeared to be financially

stable, they are perhaps in a place that might allow them to enjoy play more readily. Discussions with women in different circumstances might (or might not) experience play in the same ways.

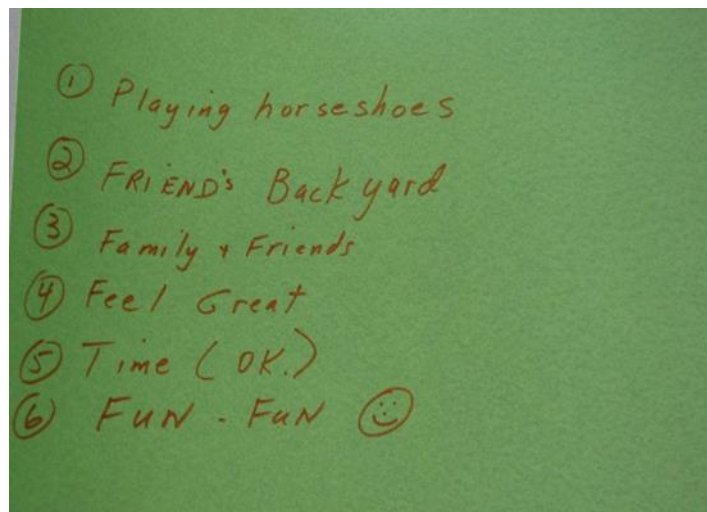
I interpreted the data to have an overarching essence of play as a doing, a feeling, and a being, and I further divided that into the sub-essences I mentioned above (time flies by and time slows down, productive and unproductive, social and solitary, serious and silly). In my exploration with the women, I discovered there was much connection and overlap between the essence of play's experiences and meanings. I want to emphasize that I believe the play concept in the lives of the women I interviewed to be complex, multi-faceted, and paradoxical, yet what follows is my deliberate, parsed interpretation of the data. My findings begin with the essence of play as a doing, a feeling, and a being.

### **Play: Doing, Feeling, and Being**

A meeting at a friend's house in her garden. A group of women sitting around tables under two umbrellas. All embroiderers, all intelligent, lively, artistic, ready to learn. A feeling of freedom from every day cares and responsibility, of laughter, camaraderie. A talk about our common interests, but also about experiences, families. Three members, all teenagers at the end of World War II, from Germany, Belgium, and Holland, talking about hunger, restrictions and fear, but still finding things to laugh about with no trace of animosity. For instance, the humour in deciding how to eat tulip bulbs, which one of them had to do. Much of the fellow feeling is because we're all women, and the talk is almost sort of shorthand. We don't need to make explanations. The whole group is already on the same wavelength. The whole day spent stitching and talking, and a bit of eating. Time to unwind, recharge, bond together. Very simple, but a time to cherish. (Charlotte, Artistic Rendering of Play)

In this beautiful articulation of play in her life, Charlotte penned an expressive passage that richly illustrates the complexity of play. Charlotte poignantly described how play is a feeling, a being, and a doing. She felt energized, joyful and carefree; doing embroidery; and being intelligent, artistic, and lively—ready to play. Women's friendship and camaraderie, embroidery, talking, being present, freedom, laughter, and humour are woven together to demonstrate how Charlotte recalled a recent play experience in her life.

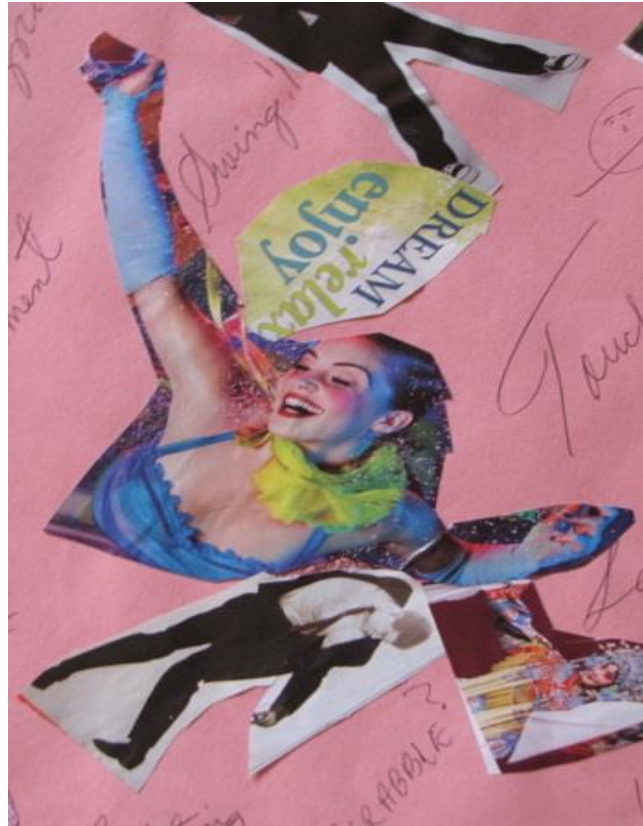
The women in my groups described play as a feeling, a way of being, and a doing. The distinctions of feeling, being, and doing are not as clear cut as this statement might appear; rather, they morph together and meander apart. At one moment, as being and doing intertwine, play is expressed as *being* boisterous and playful with grandchildren mutating into a *doing*—a quiet, thoughtful game of Scrabble in the next. Intense and solitary, serious work on a new quilt design is as much play as is a community exercise class. Still other expressions of play were as a feeling—joy in the moment. Indeed the joy might result from being playful or fully engaged in an experience of creative expression. Play is a complex, multifaceted concept.



A snippet from Sandra's collage about play in her day-to-day life

Sandra's creative reflection defined play in ways that encompassed the essences of play as I interpreted it: doing play (horseshoes), feeling play (feel great), and being play (family and friends). Sandra's wide ranging multi-layered meanings and experiences demonstrate the complex nature of play. In the everyday experience of life, just being with family and friends evoked play as Sandra's reflection revealed. In Barbara's collage about play in her life, she reflected play as a feeling, a being, and a doing. Centred around a woman with wide open arms and face and the caption "dream, relax, enjoy," Barbara wrote words that depicted her play

“friends, movement, music, swing, love, space, touching gently, laughter!!, scrabble?, fun!!, lifting, dance.” She included a cut out of an advertisement that read, “of things past. Always a surprise....always a delight” and magazine images of dancers and a young mother with child. Barbara’s artistic rendering of play showed movement, activity, emotion, dreaming, and contemplation.



Barbara’s artistic rendering of play

Friends and family were central to Sandra and Barbara’s experiences of play.

Reflecting about the role of play in her life, Christine married both ideas of doing and being in her play,

Well I find it’s almost a meditative thing, because, it takes my mind off other things like when I do anything creative or hiking especially those two things. I can lose myself in, you know, and not thinking about other things at that time, that’s why I like doing it.  
(Christine)

Christine explicitly referenced “doing” play, yet she also described her play “being” through self-nurturing meditation. The women demonstrated the interconnected nature of play, sometimes, the three ways are woven together and other times the women experienced play as just one of these ways.

As much as the women described their play as a feeling, a being, and a doing, there were some women who struggled with the very notion and urged me to define play for them, particularly early on in the focus groups as the women began their art reflection of play in their life. Their reflections on play in their own lives further emphasized the complexity inherent in the concept. For instance, Barbara asked, “[w]hat kind of play” and Victoria chimed in, “[y]es, I still am not sure,” and Barbara rejoined, “but, there are so many different kinds of play.” The supervisor, leisure programs – senior services observed one of the groups and remarked to the women, “I’m glad that everyone is having fun,” and Gloria responded, “I was really concerned about play. I don’t know about play. I’m trying to think. You know, it comes back, like stuff you like to do.” Even towards the end of the focus group, after much discussion about play in her life and the lives of the other women in the group, Victoria reflected about the role and meaning of play in her life,

Oh that’s very difficult because I am a fairly serious person or sometimes I think maybe I’m bipolar or something because I can be serious one moment and the next minute I have lighter, a lighter touch, so, it’s difficult for me to think of play as something that I [pause], I mean, I’ve written all these things down and I can define them as play because I enjoy, I enjoy doing them there isn’t anything there that I feel, ... well there isn’t anything there, oh gee this is something important that I must achieve. ... so it’s hard to really define what *play* means in my life. I enjoy doing these things. And if one can define them as play. (Victoria)

Reluctant to use the word play, Victoria continued to voice her thoughts,

Then *fine*, I enjoy play. It’s whether one can, whether I define recreation, activity, things that I relax with, do I define it as play? Because as everyone was saying before in terms of play, I thought of basketball. Physical, running around, .... but um, so this is a different interpretation of play, and one I have to think about very carefully, I don’t know



how you [directed to me] define play or you're just trying to find out how people define play? (Victoria)

Another woman was clear that she did not perceive herself to play, and that play did not have a role in her life. The absence of play was noted in this exchange with Sara and other members of the focus group,

me: Do you play, how do you play Sara?

Sara: Nothing.

me: Nothing?

Sara: Nothing, No.

Anna: Nothing? [Laughter]

Sara: No.

me: Nothing? All work, no play?

Sara: No.

Gloria: No? How come you don't play at all?

Sara: At all. Never. I play at a young age.

Sara is an immigrant woman from India and English is her second language, so perhaps she did not fully understand the nuance of our conversation. On the other hand, Sara clearly understood a notion of play and connected it with herself as a child, yet not in her current life situation. While there were other women from different cultures (e.g., the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa) who experienced play in their lives, there may be an opportunity to further explore cultural differences in the future.

### **Doing play.**

As a doing—an action—play can be sedentary and physical. Some women claimed their play was “all very sedentary really, I read, I check the movies, I go to museums” (Victoria). Later Victoria spoke about her exercise class as a play experience. Victoria and others displayed one paradoxical aspect of play, that it was also found to be a physical at some times and a sedentary one at others. For example, women spoke of: sewing, drawing, exercising, dancing, gardening, travelling, and singing. In her play reflection, Christine wrote the word “active,” and this was illustrated by magazine photographs of people together, with animals, in physical

pursuits like snorkeling. Describing her collage, Christine said, “I put active woman here. That includes maybe playing with the dog, or doing snorkeling, or dance, or being with your family.” In talking about her play Connie said, “[w]e always play cards too, and funny games with cards.”

Part of play’s doings is to provide shape, routine, and rituals in women’s everyday lives. Tess was clear, “I think it (play) has to be part of your routine,” and Sandra put it plainly, “an everyday life type of thing.” Play is also a way to keep some women grounded. For instance, several women do mental games like Ken-Ken, Sudoku, or crossword puzzles and noted how these games are parts of their everyday routines, Victoria explained, “I do cryptic crosswords every day, and I do the Ken-Ken. I do them usually at night just before I go to bed, and I do the Sudoku on Sundays.” Commenting on the role of these games, in their day-to-day lives and the embodied nature of play, Victoria continued, “I do it just um, you start doing it. And it’s just a mental challenge. You don’t even think about why you’re doing it.” The women all participated in community groups, for instance they exercised weekly or were part of a quilting or crafters groups. As Victoria noted, “[s]o in other words, Diane’s [exercise] class is for me a play.” Barbara described the exercise class as part of her routine that boosts her well-being, “[w]ell I feel better and when I wake up, in the morning I feel these aches that I never had before. And once I start moving about I’m okay, and when I get here, it’s even better.” Indeed play was infused into the day-to-day lives of most of the women.

As much as play contributed to some women’s daily routines and rituals, play’s doing adds colour to celebrations and special occasions. For instance, Mary struggled in starting her creative reflection about play and found her way into the activity by focusing on play during Christmas with her family away in the warm south.



Mary's artful reflection of play

She said, "I don't have much. [about her play reflection] ... Well I just thought it was something maybe Christmas. Decorating your tree. Whatever. We have all that stuff to do when we go down there." (Mary)

In contrast to what I have often interpreted as "women's work", several women spoke of sewing as a creative pursuit, both a stressor and a stress reliever, and a productive aspect of their play. Creativity and having a particular space for their quilt design or sewing activities was important to self-nurturing and igniting the women's creativity. One of the quilters talked about her space and the creative aspect of her play,

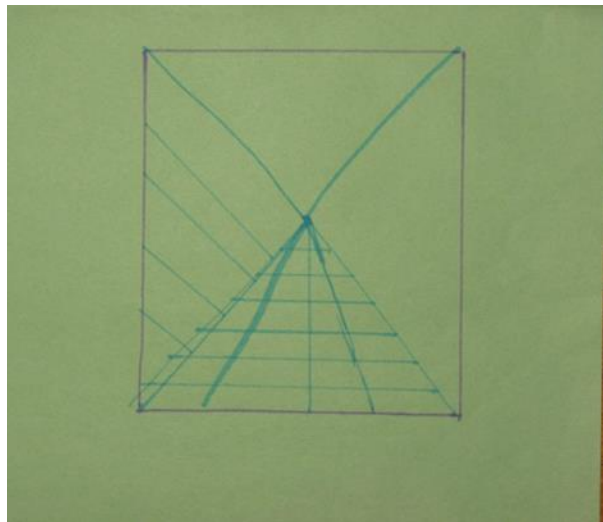
The play part of that is that I do all of my own designing and I don't ever work from other people's work. ... I spend a lot of time, I am fortunate I have a nice big sewing room of my own, so I've got, you can put things up on the wall and design on the wall and do it quite seriously so, that's my part of play...yeah. (Charlotte)

Some women had tables or closets as their sewing rooms or "play" spaces and many repurposed children's bedrooms as they moved away from home. As Connie said, "I've got the other bedroom made into my sewing room ... when the kids were small, it was their bedrooms. And I had it down in the cellar then in a little corner." This aspect of play was a doing, but also a being—being creative and nurturing the self.

Play as a doing, for instance, sewing and quilting, was transformed into a way of being for a number of the women. In her rendering of play, Connie depicted the beginnings of a guilt

design. Connie explained that she relieves stress and finds relaxation in her quilting—it is an escape.

[i]t's a creative endeavour. I know Jeff can sometimes comes in my sewing room and he says, "What are you doing?", and I say, "Well, I'm stitching and bitching." I says, "I'm stitching and ripping." ...so, I'm trying to go to sewing to get my mind away from all these other things. (Connie)



Connie's artful reflection

Connie's reflection about quilting as play demonstrates the complexity of play as a textured, rich, way to create, express, and nurture the self. Play, in this instance experienced by Connie as a doing (sewing) engenders escape, freedom, and relaxation while engaging her mind through a creative pursuit.

### **Feeling play.**

The women often associated play with a myriad of feelings. The feelings were overwhelmingly positive, only rarely, and through playfulness a negative aspect to play was described. In preparation for the artistic play reflection, I gave the women a handout with questions, "How do you feel? How is the space experienced?" One woman responded (respectively), "happy and relax. Time flies. It makes me feel alive."

Feelings of joy were often associated with play, both in the women's art and in our discussions about play. Joy was a sentiment demonstrated through Barbara's reflective art piece about play. Beginning with the woman centred in her collage, Barbara shared her thoughts about play,

But this girl, I couldn't get her, she just got into my inside, as soon as I saw that picture with her. ... Her joy, her happiness, her joyfulness, her fun. ... peacefulness. And um, to dream, to relax, to enjoy. It's very important to me. ... You must have fun in life. ... And I look back into the past quite a bit, and I hope I learn from it. I found this very interesting. It says 'Of things past.' I don't even know what this picture was all about, but it talks of things past, so I look back. I don't regret a whole lot of things. No. I just enjoy life. (Barbara)

Along with demonstrating how feelings were integral to Barbara's play concept, she also reflected play as a way of being—a way to relax, a way to enjoy. Barbara's play concept seemed to morph into her outlook on life—with learning from the past and finding joy in life. A way of being—in communion-- with self and others was also expressed alongside joy as Victoria explained in her play concept,

Play, I think is something that you can enjoy with yourself, you can enjoy with your friends, you actually feel a certain communion. (*Barbara: mmm hmm*) with yourself with the people with whom you're doing it, you have a feeling about it and that's how I would define it. (Victoria)

Play was also conceived of as a way into expressing feelings. While our discussion began on the positive feelings we get from play, Anna explained how through play we can access other feelings. In this case through one of the women's social groups and during a singing activity, feelings of grief emerged.

Anna: Yes, we have to be, ah, last week, we have a Thursday group here too, and we have a sing song with Pat

Gloria: Singing Pat

Anna: and Pat, Magdalena was here too, Magdalena lost her husband too. And we were singing this song, some kind of love involved in this song. Magdalena started crying, and we are all in that same boat. She walked out and I said, "she should have stayed, because we are all grieving something which we cannot replace."

The complexity of play is on display again, as women fully experience play moments, their feelings open, expand and reach into other aspects of their lives.

### **Being play.**

Play is an expression of who we are and what we value. Enveloping and shaping lives, play is a way of being. Play is an expression and sign of life; play gives some meaning and purpose. Yet play can also be totally irrelevant or non-existent to others. Play is paradoxical! I introduced Sara earlier, the one woman in all the groups who perceived herself to not play. Play was not in her being. At the other end of the spectrum, a woman who could not attend our focus groups contributed her thoughts about play in a note she left for me at the community centre,

I am fortunate / blessed: I am in good health. I have more-than-adequate financial resources. I live in my own house. I have family and friends in the community. I am retired. Thus, everything I choose to do feels like play. (Anonymous)

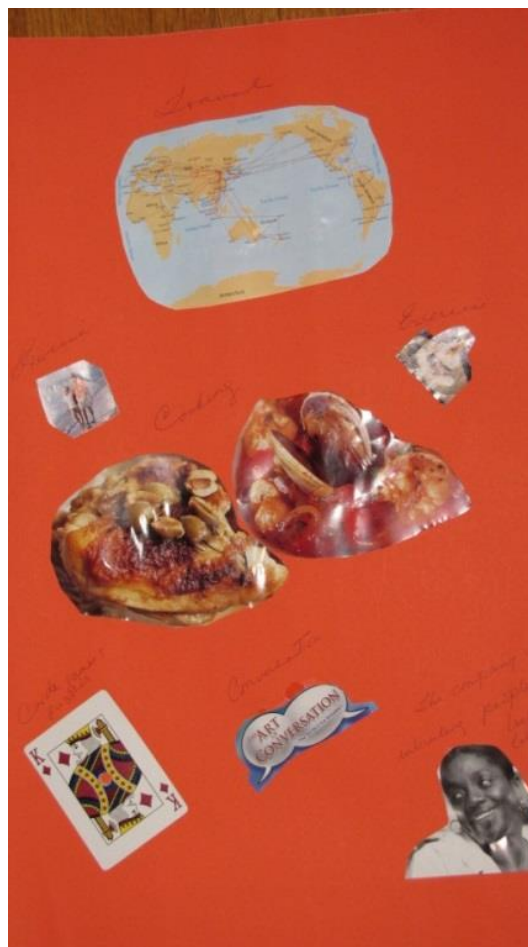
Gloria's artistic rendering of the meaning and experience of play in her life was a bookmark, which connected reading, a favourite play activity for her, to her play concept: "live, love, laugh." Gloria shared her thoughts about her play, "for me pleasure, um play. I love to read. That's something to live for. ... it's fun, gets the old brain going." Ultimately Gloria's play reflection was a mirror of her way of being in the world!



Gloria's artful reflection of play in her life

Virginia also commented, “[b]ut playing is what keeps people going...If people stop playing, then they may as well be dead.” These women’s play articulations persuade me that their play is vital to their sense of selves and integral to how they live their lives.

Play was important to many of the women, as demonstrated by this exchange, (me: Is play important to you?), and Mary responded “[v]ery important. Yes.” Tess concurred, and Mary continued, “It’s probably three quarters of my life.” Summing up her creative reflection about play, Victoria ruminated, “And I guess that’s it really. Um, I suppose that’s my life when you come to think about it. Yes.”



Victoria’s reflection about play in her life

(The words are: “travel, exercise, exercise, cooking, card games & puzzles, conversation, The company of interesting people with laughter—lots of laughter!”)

Play as being ignites creativity and sparks the brain. For some women, play is a cognitive experience, a way to learn and experience new things. This idea forms an important element of Virginia's play exemplified in her comment, "I love playing with words, that's very important to me. I love reading. I'm a perpetual and unrepentant student. I *love* to learn. I hope I will never lose that desire." Charlotte echoed this idea,

I'm always learning. I'm always reading, I'm always studying. I don't think you really ever stop learning really. And that's definitely a part of "play", for me, anyway. I've never been one just to sit and play cards and that sort of thing. It's usually something creative for me.

As part of her play, Connie, a quilter, spoke about travelling and meeting other quilters whom she has befriended along the way, "I've learned how to put colours together...not to store quilts in plastic bags...but talking when you're quilting, you learn different things and um, ...we've had lots of good times together." I sense 'being play' is reflected in the meaning behind these women's play experiences, particularly in being creative and learning.

I sensed feelings of freedom and literally freedom from cares and responsibilities were also central to some women's experiences and meanings of play. Some women conceived of play as an attitude with a sense of being able to rest and relax or even as an escape from life. Precipitated by a conversation about play as a productive pursuit, Connie said, "[p]lay can just be sitting and having a coffee and a square or a muffin," and Virginia responded, "[w]e have to give ourselves permission to be idle and to regenerate." Here I interpreted the women to conceive of play as *being*—in the moment, with friends or self, and allowing themselves to just be. I also envision the women *feeling* free, relaxed, reenergized by giving themselves time; time that they experienced as play.

Having the freedom to choose was linked to some women's experiences of play. Victoria commented on travel to particular resorts that are highly programmed, "...it's like camp, they are



arranging something every minute, you're going to and so that was play and I thought no thank you, I want to do my own thing. Yes. My own free choice." For Sandra, art was not play, so the art activity during our focus group started out as a stressful experience. As Sandra began to chat with the other women and me, she visibly relaxed and evolved the environment to fit her needs. Later, Sandra commented on her play style, "I'm more of a kibitzer." In discussing whether the art activity was play or not play, it seemed like once the women were comfortable and felt like *they* were directly themselves in the activity, it became play.

For some women, there was an element of youth and childlike qualities interwoven into play. As the women were beginning their reflections about play, an exchange between two women, who are friends, illustrated the idea of play as having an element of youth, or being childlike.

Victoria: Because the word play for me suggests youth and lightness. ... But um, Do we skip? [laughter] You know, I still find it difficult. Cause I think our minds. It all depends on what our mindsets. I think you have a nice flexible, useful mind (*to Barbara*). I don't think my mind is. [laughter]

Barbara: Because I am a child. I am a child at heart.

Speaking about her family, Virginia commented on her late husband and mother,

[h]e never lost his ability to be child-like, to play. .... My children loved to spend time with her [my mother] because she could turn everything into a game, even work. ... At her funeral, I talked about her admirable ability to remain childlike, not childish.

Several women admired adults and older people who were able to evoke a childlike, not immature, or irresponsible way into their play and playfulness.

### ***Playfulness.***

Conceptually, being playful was closely linked to 'being play' with the women I interviewed, and sometimes the words were used interchangeably. For instance, Virginia said, "This is the 'play' part. You asked us about a time when I was playful. I recently played by having a play picnic with my granddaughter and my daughter." In this example Virginia related

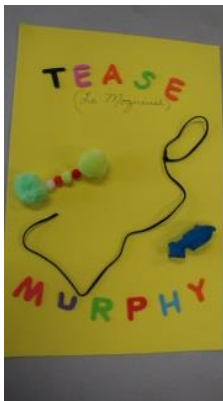
a story about playing with her family, and she named it a playful experience demonstrating the connection between the concepts of ‘being play’ and ‘playfulness’.

Playfulness is way of being that incorporates characteristics of fun, joy, spontaneity, and sometimes edgier traits like teasing and joking. Playfulness was perceived as a state of mind, having a mental quality and psychological aspect. As Tess pondered, “Isn’t there a mental quality in playful? An attitude?” Most often the women talked about playfulness as being light, humourous, spontaneous, ridiculous, and silly. For instance in distinguishing playfulness from play, Christine said, “it’s spontaneous maybe.” Tess thought playful “is not so productive as play.”

Other women were playful and considered that way of being to embody their play. Barbara said, “I see my playfulness as helping the marriage,” indeed she later commented, “I think I bring play to the marriage.” Her friend Victoria agreed and I wondered, “[n]ice, how about as a mother and grandmother. It sounds like you’re doing that with your grandkids.” Barbara responded, “[y]es, and my daughters. We talk a lot and laugh a lot. Get serious and cry.” Tess teased her pet dog and friends who “could take it.” Most often, playful people were perceived to bring joy and cheer into life, and improving their relationships and helped playful people deepen their personal relationships. Barbara was clear, “they make your life better.”

Some women expressed that being playful can have an edge to it. From teasing and joking, perhaps at times, venturing into being hurtful, as Victoria said, “Playful for me is umm, like teasing a bit. ... Playful can rather be mean in fact.” Gloria commented, “[p]layful is just joking around like we do here” and Monica responded, “fooling around.” In her art, Tess clearly depicted herself as playful, placing her nickname “la magueuse” meaning ‘the tease’ as the heading of her piece. Through her reflection, Tess recalled being given this name as a young

teenager on a student exchange and related it to her life today. Describing her play reflection, Tess said, “[t]his is just for play. I love to tease my dog.” She spoke of taking his bone away,



Tess' artful depiction of being playful

playfully tossing and chasing her beloved pet. As Tess described her art, she reflected, “I realize I really enjoy teasing.” Playfulness allowed some women to be social, to relate to other people (or pets).

Playfulness engendered fun and silliness for some. Others told stories of their playfulness, for instance Kelly playfully teased her nieces on an out of town trip with her sisters.

So I said, “come on hurry up, I got dates for us” and my sister would go right in with me. The twins are saying, Mom, you’re not going with Aunt Kelly, are you going with Aunt Kelly? She said, “why can’t I go with Aunt Kelly?” Oh we had them going that whole weekend like it was just different things we did to them. And they still laugh about that weekend. (Kelly)

Being playful, Kelly felt free to be, express, and experience herself in a carefree, amusing, and entertaining way.

During the focus groups the women used humour, teased me and each other, and this was described as being playful. For example in the third, large group most of the women were done the art activity, so I wondered,

me: Okay, let’s get started. What I thought you might, (lots of chatter still) ladies is it okay?

Kelly: Go for it.

me: Perfect. You can keep going though, cause some people aren’t done.

Gloria: I’m not done.

me: Is it ok to keep going?  
Gloria: No, please sit down.  
Kelly: Don't listen to her.  
Karla: She was being playful.  
Gloria: Yeah, I'm being playful.  
Kelly: Don't listen to her, nobody else does.

How fitting that even in our research space, the women engaged in playful banter! Teasing managed to transform the space from a research environment into one of friendliness, familiarity, and ease.

At other times there was an intelligence to the teasing, as evidenced by this exchange,

Victoria: Playful for me is umm, like teasing a bit. You know, um, like like, knowing my husband and [laughter]  
Barbara: Poor Frank, [laughter] poor man. [laughter]  
me: I hope that's not a comment on Sally.  
Barbara: No, it's not on Sally. [laughter]

The joke is on me! I repeatedly and mistakenly called Victoria by the name Sally, so Barbara's comment was a gentle poke at me. Creativity marked the stories the women shared about their playful moments (e.g., Kelly's fabricating dates and Anna's popping wheelies).

To some women there was a difference between play and playfulness, yet it was difficult to articulate. Christine demonstrated this challenge, "[i]t's a bit different. To me playfulness is more sort of ah, a more of a fun thing. That it's more spontaneous maybe. And um, yeah, a bit, yeah, to me it's different but I don't know how to describe it." Tess wondered, "[m]aybe playful is not so productive as play, you think?" I sensed this stretching to differentiate between play and playfulness was just putting too fine a point on two concepts. I also made a conscious decision how to spend the time in our discussions and did not feel it would be a good use of our limited time to tease out the details.

Underneath play and playfulness as a feeling, being, and doing were sub-essences that illuminate the paradoxical experience, meaning, and place of play in the lives of older women. First, I expand and parse how women experienced time during play.

### **Paradoxical Essences of Play**

#### **Time flies by and time slows down.**

There is a temporal aspect to play – time flies by and time passes more slowly. When completely immersed in their play, the women often described time as flying by. Play can be a time-filler, a way to stay busy, yet often the women savoured time as they played. Play also makes time more interesting. The passage of time is experienced in a paradoxical way, yet whether time flies by or drags on, neither experience of time defines something as play or not play.

In her artful reflection of play, Christine highlighted time with the headline, “[t]ime to stop and smell the roses.” As she shared her collage with the group, Christine described how she took time to play, “and then ‘stop and smell the roses,’ just sort of like, taking time, doing things you wouldn’t normally do.”



Christine’s artful reflection of play

(The words are: “active woman, time to stop and smell the roses, Canada’s happy retirees, play, live where you play.”)

Particularly as a retired woman, Christine noted, “[e]xplore new things cuz when you’re working I never had enough time.” Connie pointed out, “I find you have to, because you’re so busy right now, you’re so busy, you have, you enjoy when you have the time to relax and play. You have to enjoy it.” In both examples, the women carved out time to play, Connie perhaps in the face of a filled schedule and Christine in a new life stage. Being retired, offered several women more time to play.

When the women were fully engaged in their play, time seemed to fly by. Play can be a means of engagement or flow. In their preparation notes for the art reflection, many women wrote about time passing quickly. In describing her reflection about play in her life, Nancy, an immigrant woman said, “Happy. I relax. When I play, time flies.” Connie talked about her experience of time when she is sewing, “I find you say you are going in for ten minutes and before you know it, there’s an hour gone.”

In another focus group, Emily offered another interpretation on time and play, illustrated by this dialogue,

Time does go fast, but there are sometimes it doesn’t. (*me: right*) You need to get out, go out for a walk, talk to people. (*me: So, would play be one way that you can make time go faster?*) More interesting. (*me: More interesting?*) Oh yes! Keeps the brain going.

In this interpretation of time and play, Emily seemed to savour her playtime as a way to be mentally and socially engaged.

Waiting for others to lead the play or provide direction seemed to slow down the women’s experience of time. For instance, Virginia commented on playing with her granddaughter, who is directing the play,

With my granddaughter, time passes more slowly. ... I find that with this group, the time goes very fast, but with my granddaughter, because I have to work so hard.  
Charlotte: Yes, I know what you mean. Yeah.

Virginia: You know, watching her and being at her fingers, at her beck and call all the time, it goes more slowly, and sometimes I wish it would go faster.

Charlotte: I know, [laughs] I know the feeling.

Virginia: She wears me right out.

Engrossed in play of their choosing, often a creative endeavour, for instance, quilting or painting, the women seemed to experience time fly by, they lose themselves, absorbed in their play.

Playing under the direction of others, grandchildren, as a common example, time passes much more slowly as the women await instruction about the play, are more of an observer than a participant of the play.

Other women felt that play was a way to fill time, Sandra noted, “You have to do something because you’re not just going to sit there. (*I responded to Sandra: So it’s just a time-filler or more than that?*) Sometimes, it might be. I think you should keep your mind occupied.”

Sharon commented, after her retirement, “And then I had to think up, ‘what am I going to do with all my time.’” The experience of play as a “time-filler” is woven into the experience of play as a way to be productive and also as an escape.

### **Productive and unproductive.**

A paradox of play: women experience play as unproductive and productive. Work and not work. Freedom to choose how women were being, doing, and feeling often seemed to be a differentiator of play. For some women, the concept of play as being productive or not is also impacted by the roles women have accepted for themselves *as* women.

Some women readily accepted and even insisted that play did not need to be productive. For example, during the fourth focus group, I asked, “[d]o you think that play has to be productive or,” the women interrupted me and as a chorus responded “no,” not even letting me finish the question. For this group of women, play clearly did not need to be productive; although, it could be as this group’s very purpose was to quilt!

Victoria told us of a story about her in-laws in Ireland for whom drinking a cup of tea was a way to relax. Our conversation meandered into a discussion of what play is like, whether play might be productive or a time waster.

Victoria: I think when I do things like Sudoku is kind of my cup of tea. It's time wasting, there are other more important things I should be doing. But I think, oh well you know why not just do this

Me: Do you see play as a time waster?

Victoria: Umm, no. Not really, not genuine play. And this why doing crossword puzzles at night, for me, it isn't using time of things perhaps I think should be doing that I don't want to do because I'm lazy. Whereas if I do them in the day, and it takes me an hour, my time to do it, I think oh, how important is this really? How important is play anyway?

Barbara: Very (laughter) I think.

Victoria: Yes, but I know. I'm just saying, As opposed to the things we need to do and should be doing. How do you balance these? If you want to play all the time?

Barbara: hmmm

Victoria: You now or just be recreational, or relax. Um, how good is that? I ask these things? Cause, I am by instinct lazy. (Laughter)

Some women, like Victoria in the dialogue above, seemed to feel guilty when they took time to play. Victoria alludes to what she *should* be doing, even putting a value judgment on the type of play she might chose to do (i.e., “genuine” play, like gardening, versus play for her own benefit or recreation). Victoria is more comfortable playing in the evening when she is free from her other responsibilities. On the other hand, several women value play in and of itself as Barbara stated.

Women were ambivalent about the productivity and value of play. For instance, later in the same group I highlighted above, as we explored whether play was productive or not, Victoria said, “[o]h yes, play can be productive.” Sharon responded about the focus group itself, “[t]his is not productive. But if I'm sewing, and that could be more productive, and that's really play too because, creating something, figuring out, putting something together.” As our dialogue continued, I commented, “On the other hand also, just letting loose can be pretty productive, in my mind.” Barbara agreed, “I think so.” Sharon's perception of play and work were consistent



with Tess, “[t]hat could be play. Work in the garden, I call play, so [laughter] it’s a psychological thing. Often if you think you’re playing and it’s not hard work, but if you think it’s hard work you really don’t want to do it.” Victoria responded, “then it’s not play.” As Barbara commented, “I don’t like it when play becomes work.” I found as the women verbalized their thinking and shared their impressions with each other opinions and insights morphed.

An exchange during another group further demonstrated this idea of the productivity of play,

Rose: I don’t think I play very much.

me: No. No?

Rose: I have to be productive.

me: Okay

Tess: Oh?

Rose: I can’t play.

Mary: So I was thinking if people who do crafts for a living, are they considering that playfulness or are they considering that a job?

Tess: If they love it, such as Rose, if they love it, your job should be play.

As this snippet of dialogue illustrated, the women have varying interpretations of whether play needs to be productive or not. As Rose commented, “I just have to be productive. I can’t do anything just for the fun of it.” In other words, I perceived Rose felt she was expected to do things to both be productive and contribute. Indeed, near the end of our focus group, Rose, a painter, seemed to be rethinking her ideas about play, “I didn’t realize that I played. I thought everything I did was meaningful with work, had some motive to it. I didn’t realize I was playing.” I asked Rose, “How do you feel about that?” Laughing, Rose responded, “well, I should play more, I guess.

I should lighten up.” Her ideas about being productive were consistent with her painting, as Rose expanded her perception of what play might be, she seemed to reconsider her conception of play and the role play might have in her life.

### **Social and solitary.**

Another complex and paradoxical aspect of play is as a social and a solitary experience. The women experienced play alone and with others--family, friends, the community, and even strangers. This finding resonated across and within women. In this conversation, Barbara reflected about her play. I probed, “[h]ow would you describe play? Social, solitary, sometimes one, sometimes, the other?” and Barbara responded, “[s]ometimes one sometimes the other.”

Play was often experienced and described as a solitary pursuit, whether as an activity or a way of being. In this way, the women perceived their solitary play as a positive aspect of their lives. I asked Rose to “[t]ell us about your play. Is artistry play for you?” Rose answered, “Yes it is. It’s a solitary thing. You know, you spend a lot of time alone. And I do spend a lot of time alone. But I’m never lonely though. ... I play alone.” Through her play, Rose was in communion with herself. Indeed, in her artful reflection of play, Claudia made a tissue paper flower representing her engagement in crafts as play. Claudia experienced joy and satisfaction in her solitary play. Women’s solitary play was often creative, for example, when she spoke about her play, Christine, another woman whose play involved physical pursuits like hiking, also related her creative doings as play “[i]t’s more creative, I think. Sketching, writing. That sort of thing.” Several creative depictions reflected the solitary aspect of play, as in the artful reflective pieces by Rose and Claudia pictured below.



Rose



Claudia



Sharon

Sharon narrated her drawing about play linking fun to losing herself while at play, “The fun part is blending the colours together, I’m not very good at drawing, but to get the proportions to blend the colours that’s the fun part, so you can get involved you forget about what’s going around you.” Although her drawing is done by herself, Sharon was part of a group doing art together. In sharing her reasons for liking being with groups of people to do her art, Sharon said, “fun to be with other people.” Likewise another woman, Virginia who derived joy in what she considered solitary play (e.g., writing, reading), commented, “[a]s much as I like writing, it’s so much more fun to share it.”

Demonstrating the complexity of solitary play as an engaged, creative, even stressful pursuit, Charlotte overlays being solitary, not lonely while she plays.

Yes, definitely, but quite stressful work for me at the same time. The two are attached. You can’t get away from...I mean, yes, I can get utterly enthralled in what I’m doing, especially at the design stage. I’m painting, I’m modelling, I’m cutting things out and sticking them up on the wall and trying them. You know? My brain is very much engaged in what I’m doing and I don’t feel in the least solitary doing that. I want the peace and quiet. I don’t want anybody else around while I’m doing it. (Charlotte)

On the other hand, some women described themselves as sometimes lonely and play acted as a balm. Indeed play was a catalyst for social activity and alleviated feelings of loneliness. Of course, nothing with play seems to be straightforward, being alone and lonely was also a constraint for some women, particularly as their play changed with the loss of their spouses. Anna decried, “I’m a person. I wish I could find another partner to go dancing with. That’s my story.” In Anna’s rendering of play in her life, along with her name, she wrote, love, peace, and pasted smiley faces and flowers. Later in our discussion, Anna shared her feelings of loneliness, “Yeah. You know. My weekends are the worst. During the week, I have places to go to and so on. ... You are lonely on the weekend, that’s what I miss.” A woman wrote on her notes, “to much time by myself.”

Several of the women's art reflections of play demonstrated the social aspect of play, many included images of people together, for example, a man and woman walking together, another biking together, grandfatherly looking man with a young child, or families in a kitchen. (See for example the artful reflections of Charlotte, Barbara, and Kelly on pages 110, 112, and 135, respectively.) Social play took many forms with women friends, family, and even strangers.

Family members were often playmates for the women. For example, Connie spoke about play with her husband and friends. She said, "we do a lot of things, we like going camping together." Kelly spoke of weekends away with her sister and nieces, and Mary talked about spring get-aways with her daughters. Play with grandchildren figured large in some women's lives. Barbara joyously proclaimed her play with her grandchildren,

Barbara: If you think it's fun having children, you wait until you have grandchildren

Victoria: laughter

Sharon: Yeah, you don't have the responsibility the same, you get to go home and have a break.

Barbara: My grandson says grandma don't you talk about homework, please don't talk about homework. Laughter! I enjoy that.



Nancy's reflective play piece

Nancy beamed when she described play with her grandchildren, "play with cards, cards, yes, with my grandchildren." In playing with her grandchildren, Nancy created a joyful space for herself and her family as reflected in her "happy home" art piece, which she took home to share with her grandchildren. Sandra declared, "my life just revolves around my grandkids all

the time.” She spoke about taking the train to a neighbouring town with her grandchildren, “[t]hey have a train it takes you up to [the next town]. And then you get off get ice cream and stuff. It’s a lot of fun.” Answering questions on the handout preparing for her play reflection, Claudia wrote “I am teaching some of my family how to do a craft. We are in my apartment sitting around a table. My children and grandchildren. Happy. Time goes fast.”

Virginia went so far as to describe her granddaughter’s play as “pure play.” In describing children, Virginia explained,

I recently played by having a play picnic with my granddaughter and my daughter. We set up the picnic on the large deck in the back of my townhouse. Mostly I was intrigued to watch how my granddaughter, Louise, organized the rest of us. Her energy is so intense and so focused, that sometimes she seems so very serious about the fun she’s having and she’s quite rigid in the manner in which things need to be set up. I know she’s having fun but in an extremely intense way. For me, this is a different kind of play than what I generally do when I’m on my own. With her, I have to let go of all my inhibitions, go with the flow, act completely silly and be ridiculous. When I play with my peers, here, you know, you don’t be ridiculous. My playfulness is more inhibited, more controlled. And I need to take their needs and issues into consideration. With Louise, you know, it’s just play, pure play. With my granddaughter, time passes more slowly. With older adults, it passes more rapidly. (Virginia)

Virginia felt uninhibited, a letting go or sense of abandonment. She felt free to be silly and ridiculous, yet time slowed down, in what seemed to be a good way. Still, some women found grandchildren to be hard work, for instance, Victoria’s grandchildren live at a distance, so she experiences her grandchildren in a different way than Barbara or Nancy,

My grandchildren live in [name of town] so I don’t see a lot of them, but when I do see them, it gets a bit tiring. Cause they want to show everything they’ve been doing or want you to join games with them. They play a lot of games. (Victoria)

Friends are an important aspect of women’s social play weaving experiences through feeling, being, and doing. Play clearly engendered friendship for many of the women. Women bring camaraderie, relationships, bonding, a shared history and familiarity to their friendships. Friends often participate in the “doing” aspect of play through shared activities like singing,

dancing, bowling, and countless other pursuits. For instance, Kelly painted a picture of flowers for her play reflection which she described as,

me: Kelly, how about you? Show us what you did and how it depicts play in your life?

Kelly: Well this [her painting of flowers] is people together.



Kelly's artful reflection of social play

me: Ah, okay.

Gloria: I like that. Uh, huh, very.

Kelly: That's what we are. And now I'm just doing a collage of all different colours

me: uh, huh

Kelly: I'm just playing. [Laughter] I'm doodling.

me: What does play do for you?

Kelly: Makes me feel good,

me: Yeah? Happy?

Kelly: Happy, I'm always happy though.

me: sure

Kelly: Like I try to always be happy. Like, I'm like Nancy, I thank God for everything that I have. You know, every day I get up and I think, I got another day.

Kelly went on to describe her need for companionship while she cared for her seriously ill husband at home, "because I still, I went to this group. I had to get out. You went to your groups. I guess I learned that I need companionship and stuff early. Because you can't just be home doing nothing forever."

Connecting, getting along with others, playing together, and a shared history were valued aspects of friends who play together. Monica chatted about going to her cottage, working and enjoying a leisurely drink with her neighbour. She shared her play description in these words, “I have a cottage ... Well cut grass, and dig up waste. Ha ha. (Gloria: and at the end of the day what do you do?) ...have a drink, a gin and tonic or half a beer with my neighbour.” In describing her play, Connie spoke about the social aspect of her play, “and I wrote that I always like playing with my children at home or away from home. Meeting people haven’t seen for years. I love doing that, and especially when we’re camping.” She continued to talk about the importance of people in her play concept, for example, when she and her husband travel, they like to meet new people and reconnect with friends they have met on the road previously. Barbara linked one aspect of her own life to the concept of playfulness and being together, “I have a little company with a friend. We do, we do talks to groups (me: oh!) about, well we used to. We do talks to groups. We do a lot of storytelling, and I find that a very playful thing.” The reader is reminded of Charlotte’s lovely illustration of friends in communion as play presented on page 110.

Friends often play together, but time spent with friends is not always considered play. In her artwork, and other parts of our conversations, Barbara linked friendship with play and being playful; however, further demonstrating the complexity of play she did not ascribe a certain kind of talk with friends as play.

And friends. Friends. I put it in quite late. I don’t know what I would do without them. [me: mm hmm] especially my women friends. They are very important to me. [me: How so? The friends?] Friends. I have different groups of friends. [me: mmm hmm] I have friends with whom I have tea. I have friends with whom I have discussions on the phone. I have friends with whom I have discussions with in my house. The personal things. What you’re going through right now. What’s happening. [me: Okay] Personal things. That is not play though. [me: Okay. What would that be? <pause> or

you just wouldn't classify it as anything?] I hadn't thought about what to classify it as. Sharing. Sharing and confidence.

For Barbara, play and playfulness are about joy, the serious side of friendship is something else, not play.

Being with people who are familiar and share a history seemed to be an important aspect of play to some of the women. Building trust, being with trusted others, and recognizing a kindred spirit were aspects of play several women treasured. As Connie said about the women in the quilting group, "[w]e all had a good time. We didn't have to worry about what we said. We all get along." Commenting on her written descriptive of play, the women Charlotte embroidered with were familiar others, "[w]e've been together for so long. .... A lot of the value is the fact that we all know each other so well."

Getting inspiration from others, reaching out to people, and taking the initiative are ways that play serves older women. Women looked to play as a way to meet new people and be with others. Life can be experienced as lonely and social play can help to reduce that. Play can be fostered in the community, for instance,

Kelly: And that's what I say, there are so many lonely people in this world, and it doesn't matter whether they have a spouse or not, that spouse might be sick.

...

Me: So how do you get at people like that?

Kelly: I don't know.

Gloria: They reach out to you cause they're so lonely and you a kindred spirit recognize that. That's what she did for me. (*Gloria is referring to Kelly.*)

....

Kelly: Beth was another lady. Lost her husband. And she bowled with me. I thought oh my God, that group would be just for her. Because it's a fun group, you know. I don't know how many times she's thanked me for coming.

Gloria: yeah, yeah

Kelly: Such a nice woman. But there are so many lonely people out there.

Gloria: yup

Kelly: I don't know how you get to some of them. Other than, I don't know. I don't know. But really we need more groups for people.

Another strand of our discussion corroborated the need to take the initiative,



Kelly: Volunteering at different places, just like Sara said, she does a breakfast program at school. Anna does the seniors' centre. She goes and volunteers at the senior's centre. Like, you know you do that for friends and to be out with people.

Emily: They don't come to you.

Kelly: You have to go and do it.

Gloria: You have to go out

Nancy: Definitely

Women appreciated being in and part of the community, the accessibility, and the cost of several local initiatives. For instance, Christine spoke in glowing terms about a local municipal celebration, "Like on Sunday I went to this [celebration]. It was wonderful. It was the most wonderful.... So it's things like that that the city puts on that are really really worthwhile and they don't even cost anything." Even commenting on their involvement in our focus groups, Anna said, "[t]he city should have more of these."

A couple of the women moved to City to be closer to their adult children, so they left their support networks and play friends behind. Getting involved in more formal social activities was an important way to build new friendships. Gloria said,

[y]ou know, as Anna said, on the weekend, my daughter lives down the street. I don't live this far away from her. I moved to be here with her, but she's over there and I'm over here. I'm out of my comfort zone, because I had a really good support system [where I lived before]. I'm here now. Like, so if it wasn't for groups like this.

Anna: Yeah, You move because of your kids

Gloria: yup,

Anna: I shouldn't have either.

Gloria: yup.

In these cases, the women found community through City programs. In fact, when I asked how their play was supported, several women identified the City. For these women, their stories emphasized the vital role community can play for older women.

Although we did not explore this finding in great depth, play might be a way to build bridges across cultures. One group had two recent immigrant women one from Africa and the other from southeast Asia, and both were comfortable, known, and their cultures celebrated with

these women. For instance, Sara shared her home made samosas with the group, and here is a snippet of a conversation between Gloria and Sara,

Gloria: Hey Sara, do you have another one of your do-hickey's?  
Sara: What you say?"  
Gloria: Do you have another one of those do-hickeys? Your little,  
Sara interrupted: My samosa?  
Gloria: Please and thank you. *(long pause while Sara walks over)*  
Gloria: Thank you. What's in the middle?  
Sara: I make that, vegetables and rice  
Marie: oh, that's good.

The group's affirmation of Sara was demonstrated as she shared her play reflection with the group and Gloria responded, "Let's see hold it up. Oh, that's nice. I like that. That's good. I like your tissue paper flowers. I like that. That's good. It's nice. Yeah. Nice, very nice." Gloria's feedback was offered with kindness and sincerity.

### **Serious and silly.**

Play is serious, even stressful, and requires effort. Play is also silly. Play is fun and involves humour and laughter. Play is uplifting and exuberant.

The "quilters" described some of their play as requiring serious thought, practice, and effort. Charlotte commented, "Doing art is strange because yes, you are getting rid of your stress but you're also creating your own stress while you're trying to do it." Connie agreed, and Charlotte summed up the paradoxical nature of her play, "[s]o, it's a strange mixture."

The women identified the need to work hard, practice, be alert, not stressed, or tired when they engaged in this "serious" play. This kind of play requires intensity and focused concentration, explaining the design phase of a quilting project, Charlotte elaborated on this idea of serious play,

Well, it's work but play at the same time when you're being creative. And yes, you can be putting really serious, solid effort into it and you can have a design that just won't click for you and you can't sort out what is wrong, what's holding you up. And you

know, you can spend sleepless nights over it, lying in bed and thinking about it. And yet, in the same some strange way, it's all play at the same time.

In a different interpretation of play as serious, I discussed Barbara's playfulness as a way of being, and she described her playfulness as helping her marriage. Very serious indeed!

Silliness was often experienced around children and strangers. For instance, Anna and her sister were playful with police at a fast food restaurant and Kelly found her inner silly by teasing her young nieces.

Unlike her granddaughter who could just play without reservation, Virginia described playing with her granddaughter as requiring effort, and at the same time she spoke about having to let go of her self-consciousness, and allowing herself to be silly,

For me, this is a different kind of play than what I generally do when I'm on my own. With her, I have to let go of all my inhibitions, go with the flow, act completely silly and be ridiculous. When I play with my peers, here, you know, you don't be ridiculous. My playfulness is more inhibited, more controlled. And I need to take their needs and issues into consideration. (Virginia)

The silly aspect of play seems to be more appropriate for the young. As Christine said, "play is with children. I think of children too with play."

Just exactly what is meant by being "serious" was a point of contention between two women who had participated in the same community group for a number of years, Virginia said, "I can't just act like an idiot. I'm sure Charlotte wouldn't appreciate it." Charlotte responded, "You might be surprised," and Virginia rejoined, "[s]he's a very serious person. With a lighter touch Charlotte responded, "[o]h, yes, very serious." The conversation finished with Charlotte's comment, "I never said I'd seen myself as particularly serious. ... No, I said that I for a lot of the time, I'm solitary, but I don't think that's the same as being serious." Our discussion about play illustrated the complexity of feelings people have about how to act with and around each other.

Although silliness was often reserved for play with the young or strangers, play brings fun, humour, and laughter in the older women's lives. Fun was conceived as a way of being, as part of an activity, being with people, and sharing good times. Fun was associated with play for many of the women, their stories often contained an element of fun. As Barbara said, "you must have fun in life." Indeed, in describing her collage about play, Barbara reflected, "It's just movement and fun and joy." Kelly talked about a weekend away with her sister and nieces, playing tricks on the nieces, talking to strangers, and having fun times. In preparing for her play reflection, one woman wrote, "[t]alking with my grown-up son. ... Quite exhilarated. We spoke for an hour—an exchange of views, some self-deprecating comments with a great deal of humour." Another wrote, "I'm having fun. So much fun, time goes fast." In describing an aunt's and cousin's club, which Emily perceived as a play activity, she finished her description with "which was fun."

Play has an uplifting quality to it. In thinking about her meaning of play, Charlotte commented, "[f]or me, it's any activity which has an uplifting quality to it." The word play evokes an aspiration to be happy and joyful in some, for instance even in talking about challenges to play as older women, Connie said, "[i]t's uplifting for me. And, even going out and playing cards or we have a get-together that these ten couples once or every three months, we get together out for a meal." Anna introduced her idea of play with this thought, "I want to be happy. OH! I love to go dancing."

### **Contextualizing Play**

In this section, I present my findings about women's ability to play and be playful as older women, and in turn, how play shapes older women. I look for how attitudes about being women and being older are embedded into the women's experience, meaning, and role of play in

their everyday lives. I seek to present how society surrounds the women with attitudes about themselves as older women.

Well-being is a fundamental issue of importance to the women. Often the women I interviewed were in good health (self-reported on the background survey that the women completed after the focus group), yet there seemed to be a potential threat of health decline looming in the air. For instance, in her demographic survey, one 81 year old woman responded to the question, “[h]ow would you describe your overall well-being?” as “[r]easonably happy and healthy considering my age.” Play engenders positive health benefits for many of the women in my study. Some women inhabit stereotypical, traditional roles and have internalized and normalized society’s expectations for their behaviour and responsibilities. Ironically these norms seem to sometimes hamper and other times allow the women to play. Ageism seeps into the lives of many women, yet many demonstrated courage in the face of ageist attitudes and sentiments and clearly articulated a desire to enact and see change in society. Still others used their age as “permission” to do what they wanted.

Issues around being women and being older are complex, and I witnessed the challenges some women faced even voicing their concerns. Often the women, at least initially, felt being women and being older did not inhibit their ability to play in the way that they would like; however, peeling back the layers of our discussion, there seemed to be times being older women limited their play.

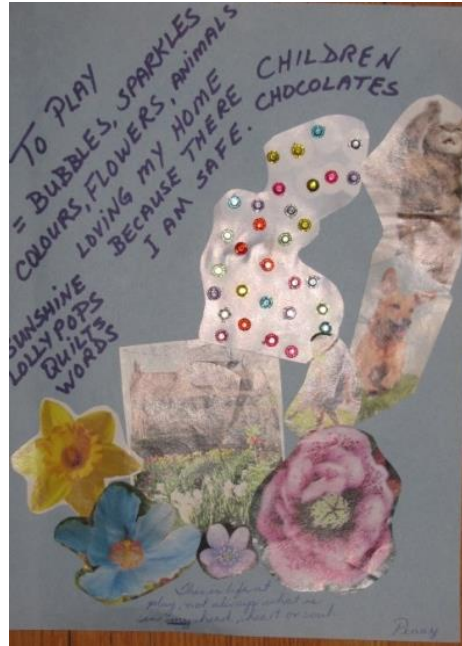
### **Health and well-being.**

Play and playfulness contribute to women’s health and well-being. The women experienced play as medicine, good for the body and soul, and a pathway to express emotions.

Play was perceived to be good for women's cognitive health. At the same time, some women held the belief that if they were ill; they could not play in the way they might like.

In a textured discussion about whether play was productive or not, Sandra linked play to her health and well-being as she suggested, “[b]ut aren't you being productive when you're playing? It's for everything. It's for your health, you know, your mind, regardless if its work, it's still play. I think it goes part and parcel.” Several women likened play to laughter, and likened laughter to be medicine. Nancy said, “When you play and you laugh. Laughing is the medicine for the body.” Kelly concurred, “[t]he body, it really really is” and Gloria agreed, “[y]eah, you're right. Yes.” Clearly some women believe that play positively influences older women's emotional and physical well-being.

Bringing vitality and helping some cope with mental health issues, playfulness was experienced as essential in at least one woman's life. Sharing her thoughts about the role playfulness has in her own life, Virginia read these heartfelt words which she wrote as part of her play reflection, “[t]his playfulness keeps you young. It's vital to my own daily existence. Having suffered from chronic depression, all my life, really, I need to be able to lighten up as often as possible.” In this instance, I sensed play was a way to self-nurture.



Virginia's artful reflection of play

At the same time, mental health issues can constrain the way that some women are able to play. Virginia softly, quietly, shared her expression of what *idealized* play is to her, “play equals bubbles, sparkles, colours, flowers, animals, loving my home because there I am safe, children, chocolates [laughs], sunshine, lollipops, quilts, words...and so this is life at play, but it's not always what's in my head or heart, unfortunately.” After a few quiet moments, I gently repeated Virginia's words, “[t]his is life at play. Not always what is in my head or heart”? The atmosphere was one of caring and respect, not awkwardness or discomfort. One of the other women at the group, responded, “[s]he suffers from depression.” In another moment Virginia said, “I wrote about that. Just a little bit.” At other points in our initial focus group discussion and again at our follow-up feedback group, Virginia spoke to her highly analytic nature, often second guessing herself while at play. For instance, in playing with her granddaughter, Virginia said,

I find I'm also quite tense when I'm playing with my granddaughter because my daughter doesn't want me to use certain words and because I'm not to make certain mistakes. And

so I have to be aware of that. So the playfulness is also bit tense. You know, creates a bit of tension for me. And I have to worry that she's not going to get hurt, you know, so there's more to it than that.

Perhaps Virginia's mental health issues stifled her ability to play without reservation.

Play and playfulness also contribute to women's physical well-being. For some women, play's doing sometimes takes the form of exercise, and this in turn contributes to women's health, as Barbara reflected on her participation in the exercise group,

Well I feel better and when I wake up, in the morning I feel these aches that I never had before. And once I start moving about I'm okay, and when I get here [at the community centre for the exercise class], it's even better. When I get here. [laughter] When I do get here. [laughter] But no, it really helps me.

Being able to play in the way that women want is impacted by health. Tess voiced this perception, "I find a lot of people begin to have trouble with their hands, feet. They give up the dancing. They gain weight. I think health is a big factor in your playfulness."

Physical health issues can also be problematic for some women to play in the way that they would like to now and the threat of health decline looms in the air. As Charlotte pointed out, "[y]ou know, for older women, your health has an awful lot to do with it. If you're really sick you can't play. So, we're all fortunate, we're all in, you know, reasonable good health." Charlotte is foreshadowing the inevitable, expected decline our society teaches us comes with age.

This threat of declining health was troubling for several women. Sandra a woman who has cared for people all of her life, including her mother and elderly aunts, spoke with trepidation about her own future,

I looked after my mum, she lived with us. My mother-in-law. She lived with us. We've always had a house full of people which I love. ... So my daughter said, "one day I'll look after you." And I say, "I hope not. I don't want to have to be looked after. I want to be on my own all the time." I do have a husband mind you. I'm even looking after him. He seems to be ageing much faster than myself, type of thing. We all age differently.



Play is both influenced by and enhanced health. Physical and mental health issues may inhibit the way a woman is able to play. At the same time, play can engender benefits for women's health and well-being.

### **Expectations of gendered roles.**

Women's play was often impacted by their perceived responsibilities, or adherence to normative gendered roles. Just what those roles might be varied according to the individual, but they seemed to be present for several as illustrated in this dialogue,

Charlotte: Unfortunately, that's the catch when you're a woman, a little bit of your brain is always watching the clock because it's time to get the next meal on...[laughs] You can't get away from that, unfortunately, unless you're very lucky.

Virginia: And sometimes when you're playing in your studio, as we'll call it, there's this niggling thing, "Oh, I didn't vacuum down there..."

Charlotte: No, I don't get that. I don't worry about that but you can't get away from the meals, unfortunately. No, if the house is dusty, it'll still be dusty tomorrow, I don't worry about that.

With their attention partially drawn away to domestic responsibilities, I wonder if the women were fully immersed and able to completely play in the way they might like to.

Women's ability to play in the way they would like to are sometimes constrained by the roles expected of them. In talking about whether play is productive or not, some women felt guilty if they were not attending to responsibilities they had taken as women. A conversation between several women illustrated this idea,

Virginia: I have difficulty, when I'm reading, and I'm reading one of the most lovely things in the world, I have to talk myself out of feeling guilty. I actually have to sit down, and "You don't need to feel guilty, Virginia, it's okay, you can read this book". (Me: mmm, hmm) But I do have to tell myself.

Charlotte: It's very difficult after a lifetime of being a housewife. You're reading a book and you're thoroughly enjoying it and you realize your eyes have scanned a whole paragraph, and all the time, you were thinking, "What are you going to have for supper tonight?"

Connie: Yeah, yeah.

Charlotte: And it's incredibly difficult to break ourselves of that

Some women demonstrated an almost overwhelming responsibility to care for others which led them to feelings of guilt as they played.

I have a bit of a problem. I do so many things that I like to. I feel guilty cause I'm not helping everybody. ... but here I am, healthy body, all I am doing is helping myself, .... so I have a bit of a guilty conscience. .... There are so many people that need help. ... well I could be doing more. (Mary)

Perhaps Mary limited her play, perhaps Mary felt guilty. Mary's trepidation hardly felt novel in the context of our discussions, rather her words seemed to reflect an ache many women experienced.

Sharon travelled four hours (each way) to another town to take care of her granddaughter for ten days a month. While this was a significant and time-consuming responsibility, on balance, Sharon accepted taking care of her granddaughter as enjoyable and beneficial, she explained, "that's life. Anyhow, it's fun I get to see her otherwise. I get to participate in her hockey and her lacrosse and take her to her school activities. So, where there are disadvantages, there are advantages." In this complex situation, Sharon viewed her actions as both a responsibility to her granddaughter and a positive benefit to herself.

Some women wished to be free of family responsibilities,

I've reached the stage where I say, it sure would be nice to unload this responsibility on somebody else for a change. Not all of them and not all the time but once in awhile, I would like someone just to take over and leave me, just leave me. (Virginia)

As Virginia expressed it, some women felt a willingness to accept some of the care required in her family, yet may yearn for shared responsibility and a measure of freedom.

At the same time, some women relish caring for their grandchildren, and caring provides them with the opportunity to play. Sandra said, "somebody's gotta be with the kids." When I asked how she felt about this responsibility, Sandra responded "I like it." She described how it kept her busy, younger, and engaged, not passive in life.

I think that's what keeps me young. Like you know. Because I'm always with them. If I pick them up at school. One takes dance after school, one plays baseball hockey or football. I'm dropping them off at their places and picking them up. I think that's what keeps me younger. Busy. Not sitting around watching tv and stuff like that. (Sandra)

There were many instances during the focus group that Sandra spoke with joy and tenderness about caring for her grandchildren. Her care transformed her life, brought joy and love, albeit as she mentioned earlier, once in a while she wished for a break.

Several women spoke of their strength *as women* given their caring, nurturing, and social traditions. A snippet from one groups conversation, was precipitated by Emily's pondering,

Emily: I was wondering, do women have a harder time when they are on their own or do men have a harder time? I often think, if my husband, if I'd gone first, how he would have handled things?

Gloria: Not well

Kelly: Not well,

Gloria: Women are survivors for the majority

Anna: They want you right, if you get a friend, they want you right away, want ah how to say

Kelly: To look after them

Anna: To look after them.

Claudia: Do their laundry

Gloria: Are you talking about the sack

Anna: Well not per se that, they can't do nothing anyway, but I mean

Kelly: No, they want you to cook and clean and

Anna: yeah

Nancy: You can say women have endured more than men

Gloria: Yes. Absolutely. No doubt about that.

Kelly: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Anna: We can be a lot more alone and be um, knitting or crocheting

Nancy: yes

Anna: or talking to people than the men can be.

Kelly: In our, I think, in our culture and our age group the men were taken care of more so than in the younger.

Gloria: Yes, absolutely

Kelly: So that men in our age group they are looking for somebody to cook, clean, do their work,

Gloria: to take care of them

Kelly: take care of them because they always were taken care of.

In this way, many of the women perceived they had developed strengths in building and nurturing relationships because they are women. They also seem to believe that these strengths would be vital to them as they aged.

Husbands, present or not, invited complexity into women's lives. Whether it's in the role of wife that many women in these groups internalized "[t]his is what I grew up with right, you're supposed to take care of your man" (Gloria). As Emily succinctly put it, "a woman never gets to retire." Still Emily did not simply accept this idea, in communicating with her husband, she said,

Emily: 'Let's talk about that.' But you know what, the next morning I woke up I could hear this sound way down in the basement, a sizzling sound. Here he was down there vacuuming,

Gloria and Kelly: oh!

Emily: He looked after the vacuuming right then for the next 20 years.

Kelly: wow

Emily: So wasn't that, you need to talk it over.

Gloria: yeah, yeah, it depends on the man too.

Emily: no matter even if you're in a small place or a house still or whatever. Work still has to be done.

Emily resisted society's expectation for her to care for the house and family, particularly into retirement. Emily stood up, she communicated with her husband about her feelings and clarified her need for equity in the domestic work of their family. Given our groups' conversations, I am conflicted and uncertain as to how many women have actually had "the talk" so that husbands and wives share the responsibilities to keep their homes and lives well lubricated.

Husbands seemed to both challenge and facilitate women's freedom. Some women felt free because of the men they married, while others felt they needed to care for their husbands.

This conversation, precipitated by Rose, a 92 year old woman and a widow of 40 years,

Rose: You people who have husbands aren't free to do things. Do you feel that you are?

Tess: Oh look when I married this guy I thought; now I'm free. I just, because I think if you get a husband that you really want and like you feel free.

Sandra: Well I feel exactly the opposite [laughter]

Tess: Do you? Oh, I don't know.

Sandra: You mean when you're married you can do exactly what you want?

Tess: Well sort of. I went with so many guys who wanted me to be like this or like that, I could never be myself. The man I married, I'm myself.

Christine: That's nice.

Tess: I feel free.

Rose: Well you have a lot in common. You travel. You married the right guy I guess.

Tess: And we love words, languages

Me: Nice

Sandra: I think I became my husband's mother when we got married

Christine: What, pardon me?

Sandra: I think I became my husband's mother when we got married.

Tess: Maybe you like to mother.

Sandra: Well maybe. I want a break every once in a while,

Tess: Well take it.

Sandra: It just seems, maybe it's in my mind. But it just seems he can't do, with, you know. Even my daughter said, "He can't do, oh my gawd, when are you coming home? He's driving me nuts." ...

Mary: Well, I'm married, but I can do what I want to. There's no problem there.

Depending on the relationship, some women feel obligated, some of the time, to care for their husbands. Still others feel a sense of freedom in having found a partner with whom they are comfortable to just be and do what they want.

For others being widowed impacted women's lives in many ways. Playing in the way that they would like to was just one example. Anna lamented the loss of her spouse. As she poignantly described her play, Anna sang and danced around the room, "I wish I could find another partner to go dancing with. That's my story." Christine commented as a widow, she could not travel the way she would like to. Demonstrating the taken-for-granted attitude about needing a husband, Gloria casually remarked, "[t]oo many women and not enough men, what can I tell you?" A couple of women moved closer to their adult children, yet experienced loneliness. Anna spoke about her move to this city,

I lived in [somewhere else] before. And we were not ready, we were, he wasn't sick at all at that time. My daughter said, "Mom, why don't you look at bungalow here, there's one for sale here." He went with me. We bought it in March and in April he passed away, so he never moved with me here, and [this city] was strange to me completely. If I would have known, I would have stayed [somewhere else]. ... This is why you should not be alone, you should be with couples, whatever, yeah. I miss, I wrote down, I miss ... the activities that we used to do.

Outside of play, one widowed woman spoke of being perceived as inadequate and feeling less than because she never remarried,

The only thing and aspect in my life I think where the woman part of it has been a serious problem is, I was widowed at a very young age, and I always felt that people perceived me as being inadequate because I never remarried, I never found another mate, so I feel diminished because I wasn't capable of attracting a mate. (Virginia)

Without a husband and traditional family, decades later this woman still did not feel worthy enough, which speaks to the power of traditional gendered expectations in some women's lives.

Sometimes as women, particularly older women, participants felt they needed to be and act in certain ways, Mary commented about her play, "I crochet. I have all these things I am *supposed* to be doing, because I am supposed to be a grandmother." In a discussion precipitated by how Virginia felt less inhibited with her granddaughter, she explained,

me: I'm sort of interested in your last comment about ...with your granddaughter that you felt uninhibited, you felt like you could just like let go, that's what you said, right?

Virginia: Do really stupid things and she would just laugh her head off. Well because, a child doesn't think. We think too much as we get older. We're always weighing, you know, who's right who's wrong, is this bad is this good. Whereas children, they just know, this is bad and this is good, they don't *think* about it, you know what I mean? They don't *analyze*. So, you do have to take other's peoples' feelings into consideration. That's what kids, children have to learn as they grow up, is to take other people's feelings into consideration.

me: Right.

Virginia: So, I can't just *say* anything I want to say.

me: Right

Virginia: I can't just act like an idiot.

Virginia couched her very being, explaining that she needed to be aware of, care about, and felt she had to conform to perceived expectations of how older women should act.

Embracing new possibilities, freedom from child raising responsibilities allowed some women to return to play. Charlotte talked about her embroidery,

I did when I was younger and then I had a long gap while the two kids were growing up. ... And then soon after we moved here to the city, there was a notice in the newspaper saying that somebody was going to start an embroidery group. So, I went along that night

and I've, you know, been active ever since. Yes, so I sort of picked it all up again. It felt odd at first, and I had to learn it all over again at the beginning but it comes back.

Connie reflected the same experience of having time to play once the children left the home, "and that's the only time you can do it, when you haven't got kids anymore to take care because they take the majority of your time." Rose echoed similar sentiments, "I didn't have time to play when I was young. I was working. I had two children. My husband was blind. I just worked from morning to night. The kids would get to bed, then I would work." Clearly being older liberated some, at least allowing them more time to play.

Some women spoke about women and men becoming more the same, with less difference between the sexes, almost genderless. Comments offered by some of the women illustrated this notion, "I think we get much more similar to men as we get older there isn't so much of a difference between women and men" (Tess). Later Rose remarked on the physical being, "[e]ven in looks they do. Sometimes an old man, you don't know whether he's a man or a woman. <Tess: yeah yeah> You can't even tell the difference."

Some women viewed their age as a permission to be and act the way they want. Others found an activist voice.

So, that's what I find, we have to *fight*. Like Kelly said, you know, we're on fixed incomes, and some of us aren't as well off as others, and we have to fight for every little thing. And it shouldn't be but it is. So we do. We fight. (Gloria)

Kelly agreed and the conversation continued,

We speak out. We speak up and you know the other thing that upsets me too is this politically correct agenda. You see something which is fricking wrong, but it's politically incorrect to say anything. I figure I'm getting to that age that I can be crotchety. And say, "excuse me, *no!* I disagree." Why should it be like, you know, we have to speak up. (Gloria)

In addition to having to stand up for what older women want and need, older women have society's ageist perceptions to contend with.

### **Ageing and ageism.**

Gloria: Wait, you know they say there is no age discrimination.

Kelly: yup, yup

Gloria: I say bullshit, cuz there is.

Kelly: There is.

Gloria: They look at us.

Gloria: We got the gray hair, the white hair.

Kelly: yup.

Gloria: and we're just, you know.

Kelly: yup.

Gloria: They don't look. Whereas, when I was, well, I don't have family around. Cause I grew up far away from family. They used to revere their elders, and listen to them.

Now, we're, you know, okay, you've had your time.

Kelly: Yeah.

Gloria: You don't know anything. They know everything.

Kelly: Yup.

Gloria: We kind of sit back and go (*snort*) go, okay, whatever.

Kelly and others: laughter!

Ageism is alive and not so well for many of the women in my research! For instance, this conversation ensued when Christine described her experience shopping for hiking boots,

Christine: Because I went into a sports place. They sort of look at you like what are you doing here? I wanted really good hiking shoes. I guess they figured I wanted a certain kind of shoe, like just a walking shoe. A regular walking shoe; whereas I needed a good hiking shoe. They didn't consider I'd be a hiker because I was older sort of thing.

me: So they took one look at you and had you in a walking shoe

Christine: That's right.

Sandra: Orthotics, eh?

Christine: well, not, [laughs] something like that. They view you differently.

Reiterating Christine's experience, Mary commented on a young man who helped her in a camera shop, "[h]e probably looks at me here is an old lady who doesn't know much about cameras which is the feeling I get."

Older women have to work harder at being visible, a desired member of our community and appreciated. Our dialogue, for example, in one group illuminated these ideas,

me: ...I read that older women feel invisible?

Connie: You are.

Charlotte: You are.

me: Tell me what that's like.



Virginia: You have to work harder at making yourself seen, I suppose, or appreciated, perhaps, that... You have to work harder at it.

Connie: It's not like when you have children when you're busy all the time, and you're with other kids and you're with your own age. As you get older, you stray from other people, you become more alone. Umm...you're not, like, I don't like being busy and having my calendar filled up with this, this, this, and this. I like saying, ahhh, this is my time.

Virginia: People tend to think we're not...we're losing our marbles, there's that word again. [laughs] We're not as bright as we used to be, and so they don't think our answers, our opinions are useful maybe.

As Mary reflected, “[w]ell I am thinking about church too. We don't have a lot of younger people going to church anymore. And yet they don't want the older people, they want to eliminate older people.” In our discussion about how older people are treated, we spoke about the contribution many seniors make through volunteering. Christine described her perception that on a micro level, the efforts of older people are appreciated, yet it does not translate into how seniors are treated or considered on a societal basis, “[v]olunteers. A huge thing for seniors, are we recognized? I think we are recognized in each individual area. But does society really appreciate how much seniors really do?”

The notion of what their age and ageing means was complex. Some viewed themselves as same as they have always been and other feel that they have changed, this exchange highlights an aspect of this complexity,

Charlotte: try to believe that as you get older, you're the same person. I feel exactly the same inside now at eighty as I did when I was twenty. I know more, but I'm the same person. You don't change as you get older, not really, not inside and not in the way you react to things or see things.

Virginia: I think I have changed.

Charlotte: You think you have changed? You got stronger maybe.

Virginia: I'm more tolerant, more patient, more compassionate.

Charlotte: But that's not the same thing.

Virginia: Less judgemental.

Charlotte: Okay, that's not quite what I'm trying to say though. People seem to think if you're eighty, you must be a different person to someone who is forty or thirty, and you're not.

Connie: You're still the same person, just got older.

Charlotte: I've talked to sister-in-laws and people my own age, you still feel the same, you are still the same person, no matter how old you are.

Virginia: mmm, hmm

Karla: Are we really the same on the inside? Or have we, is there a nuance there that...?

Connie: I think you're the same on the inside unless health takes over.

Charlotte: Yeah, once again it comes back to having your health. That's the dividing line, isn't it? Once your health starts to go, or with us, of course, sometime it's about when your brain starts to go and then you're not the same person, of course.

In this conversation the women's views were divergent. Some felt that while they have improved as a person, they were essentially the same as they have always been. Others experienced a difference, yet were not able to articulate what that difference might be.

For some women, their age seemed to impact how they viewed play, initially struggling to understand what play might be for them, for instance, Victoria said, "[s]o I guess if it's something that you do, that you feel a sense of abandonment I guess that's how at my age I would define play." Later Victoria contemplated that most of her life was play "I suppose that's my life when you come to think about it. Yes."

At times, the women experienced others as not expecting them to play or be playful. For instance, in telling us a story about her sister and herself with police officers in a coffee shop, Anna laughed, "My sister, we went to a restaurant. There was a whole bunch of police sitting there having a coffee, I says, 'hey let's go outside and do some wheelies.' They laughed, cuz we're all grey hair." Virginia shared her experience of being playful,

I find I have more luck with younger people being silly. They seem to just take you for what you are and they fall into your groove. Like I've had fun in the dollar store where I found a toy that I didn't know how it worked and there were a couple of teenagers and they told me how it works and we ended up playing with it for ten minutes and having a good jolly laugh. ... So, it's easy to be silly with young people and strangers, I think, than sometimes your family thinks that you're just Grandma and you should be doing serious stuff. (Virginia)

Virginia felt inhibited and concerned about being silly around people she knew and felt more comfortable around children/teens or people she did not know. This notion speaks to ageism and

the idea that play is only appropriate when we are young. Still, some of the women, like Virginia in this instance, use play as a way to resist ageism. Some women felt their age did not impact their ability to play or be playful, as Victoria said, “It’s not that I think, oh well, I’m too old to play.”

Still, my findings are not quite that straightforward. The women do not only feel invisible, diminished or unappreciated. Older women’s experiences were complex and, some of the women feel *less* invisible as they have gotten older and thus more empowered to speak out. Charlotte spoke of her experience,

Charlotte: Well, our generation has taken for granted that of the pair, the husband was the important one, you know. Like, the bank, you didn’t get a loan. Your husband got the loan.

Connie: yes

Charlotte: If you were very lucky, he was allowed to co-sign the loan for you, you know. And in fact, this unit that stood in front of whoever you were dealing with only saw your husband. It wasn’t that old women were invisible, it was that women were invisible. Until I was maybe thirty or forty, I think I felt that way.

me: You don’t feel like that now?

Charlotte: No, I don’t. No, strangely enough.

Our conversation continued, and Connie described her own feelings of empowerment,

Connie: It’s like when we go to our investor, I’m not afraid to speak out, but he talks to Jeff, he doesn’t talk to me, but I’m not afraid now to butt in and speak out...and I had a feeling that I had to speak out and in my opinion, too.

me: And you are doing that now?

Connie: yes

me: But you might not have done that before?

Connie: right

me: so what’s changed for you?

Connie: I think life has changed because...and the way of living has changed, and this has brought more things out. Watching things, talk shows on t.v. and watching the news and more women are speaking out and I think are aware and I think, this is what’s helping.

Connie’s feelings of empowerment are engendered, at least in part, by images she sees in the media and perhaps other around her.

At the same time, through play, one woman felt emboldened to act in the way she wants to, albeit with strangers and young people. This conversation in one group surfaced as we talked about the challenges older women face when they play,

Virginia: But, also, I think there's a perception that older women shouldn't be acting silly and if you try to...like even I've noticed sometimes in the grocery store, if you try to be, to be jolly with somebody...

Charlotte: Yes.

Connie: yeah

Virginia: They think there's something wrong with you. They say, "She's not all there" or "She's lost her marbles or something".

Connie: Yes. (laughs)

Virginia: I find I have more luck with younger people being silly.

Some of the women might be ageist themselves, with a negative notion of ageing. For instance, Mary said, "I don't feel old. When I go in the store, I want them to think I'm not old." Sandra echoed the sentiment of old as undesirable, "I think you become old in your mind. And some of us in our bodies, when our bodies start to fail." In chatting about recruiting her son-in-law to help her with technology, Mary commented, "[a]nyway, his mother said to me one time, why don't you get him to help you. And I said, 'to tell you the truth I don't want him to know how stupid I am.'" This comment elicited a chorus of knowing, empathetic laughter. Buying into the notion that personal changes might be blamed on their age seemed to be a relatively common notion among the women.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented my findings. I sought to describe the meanings and experiences of play and playfulness to older women, and its place in their day-to-day lives. Interpreting older women's play as a phenomenologist informed by feminist gerontology; I explored, described, and interpreted play using the voice, words, lived experience, and artful reflections of four focus groups made up of nineteen women.

I found play to be a complex, paradoxical notion with no single, universal meaning, experience, or role within or across the women. Alternatively, I knit together an essence of older women's everyday play as an independent and interconnected doing, feeling, and being. Underneath I traced paradoxical notions of: time passing quickly and moving slowly, play as productive and non-productive, a social and a solitary experience, and play as serious and silly. Articulating a difference between play and playfulness was difficult for the women as the notions were closely aligned, particularly as "being play." I interpreted play to be mostly positive, perhaps not surprisingly, a mirror of my perspective.

I sensed the women's play was challenged and enhanced by health issues, and in particular I perceived the tragedy discourse of ageing weighed heavily on the minds of the women. Further, thoughts about ageing also influenced how some women experienced play in their day-to-day lives, even to the extent that one woman perceived herself to *not play*, yet, sometimes being older allowed women more freedom to play. Ageism is a precarious experience and notion to many of these women; although, I discerned the women manoeuvred and discovered ways to cope with and resist ageism in their lives. Loneliness and mental health issues had a profound impact in several women's lives and on some women's ability to play in the way that they would like. Society's gendered expectations complicated women's play and continued to be experienced in the lives of some women. Gendered expectations empowered women's ability to play yet could also impede women's ability to fully embrace play.

In the next chapter I weave together my findings with the literature, where the literature supported my findings and where the two diverge. I outline what contributions I hope to make to older women's play and the developing body of literature about the lives and experiences of older women, from their standpoint. Along the way, I suggest possible future research

directions. Finally, I discuss my thoughts about collecting data through arts-based methods with older women.

## **Chapter Five: Caring, Sharing, Comparing, and Daring**

This study's aim was to explore the experience and meaning of play and playfulness to older women, and its place in their day-to-day lives. Through focus groups with older women, listening and interpreting their words and contemplating their artful reflections, I found play to be a complex, multifaceted, and paradoxical phenomenon in the everyday lives of older women.

Older women described their lived experience of play in three, often interconnected, sometimes separate ways: as a doing, a feeling, and a being. Beneath the overarching experiences of play were meanings and experiences that clustered around these seemingly paradoxical sub essences about play as: time flies by and time slows down, productive and unproductive, social and solitary, and serious and silly. Playfulness and play were both mostly positive concepts that are closely aligned, but could have a potential negative side if being playful became teasing, mean, or hurtful. Being older and being women complicated and liberated women's ability to play in the way that they would like with ageism and the potential threat of health issues at the heart of the matter.

In this chapter, my discussion describes how the findings align with existing literature, how my findings are supported by and support the literature and where my results seemed to depart. I outline how my research contributes to our burgeoning knowledge about older women's play and the growing body of literature about older women's lives and experiences, from their perspective. I also highlight and hope to add insight about collecting data through arts-based methods with older women.

### **Play Concept**

My findings supported the musing in the literature about the broad, complex, and elusive nature of play (e.g., Brown, 2009; Burghardt, 2010; Cohen, 1993; Ellis, 1973; Sutton-Smith, 1997). The meanings, experiences, and place of play and playfulness in the day-to-day lives of

women in my study were wonderful, complex, and paradoxical. My findings concur with many scholars (e.g., Burghardt, 2010; Cohen, 1993; and Sutton-Smith, 1997) who argued that play needs to be broadly defined and variable. Brown wrote, “[p]lay is a hugely complex and controversial subject” (2009, p. 219). My initial aim as a phenomenologist was to discover the essence of play, yet what I encountered was not a single essence, but rather a multiple of essences about play—a composite, a complexity (Morin, 2008). I found that play was neither universally defined nor experienced in any *one* way within the women, nor across the women in my study. Recognizing that multiple essences exist, phenomenology was as a fitting way to research the *lived experiences* of play.

My findings affirmed Sutton-Smith’s (1997) suggestion that play ought to be studied from an interdisciplinary perspective and from the viewpoint of the players. As Sutton-Smith argued, a pigeon holing of play did not reflect how the women experienced and defined play. As Morin (2008) contended, human needs and desire are outside the categorical silos of traditional realities. In considering play, the whole seems to be more than the sum of its parts.

As I voiced play as paradoxical in this study, I am suggesting play’s paradox is multilayered and inclusive. Play’s paradoxes occur both within and across women, and there are paradoxes in play’s meanings, how it is experienced, and the place play has in the women’s lives. For example, across women, art was a play experience for many, yet for at least one woman it was not play. On the other hand, within individual women, other experiences, for instance being with friends might be play in one moment and something entirely different in the next. Bateson (2006) named play paradoxical, but his use of paradox was to frame, to underscore the divide between play and not play, to understand play’s role in developing communication, and particularly in developing his theories of psychotherapy. Early on in his



classic work, *The Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith (1997) also called play paradoxical, he wrote, “is this an object or a toy...do you mean it, or is it pretend...is this serious, or is this nonsense...as if all these paradoxes were not enough” (p. 2). Like Bateson, Sutton-Smith seemed to be referring to the play/not play frame. In this study, my naming of play as paradoxical is not to distinguish what is and what is not play, rather to explore our conception of play as being *both* seemingly opposed ideas. I am not applying a mathematical concept of paradox (per Bateson’s invocation of Russell’s paradox), rather suggesting a linguistic interpretation of paradox as both/and and even neither/not. It was Sherry who initially suggested to me the women frequently described play in ways that were often quite paradoxical. After my wrestling with the notion of paradox as an either or concept, I settled into the idea of paradox as including and/both rather than just either/or. While my use of the word paradox is different than Bateson or Sutton-Smith, I sense the concept richly illuminates the many facets and complexity of the women’s play.

Considering play as complex builds on the notion of play as paradoxical. Morin (2008) further elucidated my comprehension of the notion of paradox through his conception of complexity stating “[f]or ‘either/or’ we substitute both ‘neither/nor’ and ‘both/and’” (p. 33). I sensed the women’s experiences and meanings of play fit this notion. Sutton-Smith (2008) wrote, “[p]lay is a complex phenomenon with many levels, and any acceptable theory of play needs to encompass all of them and account for their existence” (p. 118). Sutton-Smith’s comment further cements and adds credence to my notion of play as paradoxical and complex.

Play was integrated into the everyday fabric of life for many of the women in my study. Play provided ritual and routine in the day-to-day living of many women, consistent with Cheang (2002). For example, several women used puzzles as a way to end their days. Other women

used their weekly exercise class as a way to inject physical activity into their lives. Play also provided texture and meaning in some women's lives. The women played in their sewing rooms, and they played with their friends and family. This contention of weaving play into the everyday supports earlier leisure literature in the lives of older women, as examples, Henderson's (1990) study of older farm women, Havitz' (2007) writing of his Grandma, and Wearing's (1998) belief that for women, looking beyond traditional dichotomies (e.g., work/not play, play/not play) is essential.

The women's experiences were for the most part, unlike Huizinga's conceptualization of play as "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life" (1955, p.13). Many of the women I spoke to seemed to take a broader view of play, not separate from the rest of or ordinary life at all. In fact several women identified that play is central to their lives—a way of being—and as one woman wrote, "[t]hus, everything I choose to do feels like play." Still my findings do not completely depart from Huizinga either, several women described play as part of special occasions or celebrations and this seemed to provide an opening into or permission to experience play in their lives.

Perhaps the play of older women is similar to the play of young children and adolescents. For example, for some women the conception of play as enveloping their lives fits quite neatly with children, particularly preschoolers, whose entire lives may feel like play (Kleiber et al., 2011). If the goal of adolescent play is to "acquire the skills to thrive in the world" (Brown, 2009, p. 109), might a goal of older women's play be to continue to acquire, refresh, and enhance their skills to thrive in the world?

**Play: A doing, a feeling, and a being.**

Without articulating their play concept as a feeling, a being, and a doing, the play theorists I studied often foreshadowed my thinking. To select a few of Brown's (2009) telling thoughts, a doing—"[m]otion is perhaps the most basic form of play" (p. 214), a feeling—"[p]lay is nourishing" (p. 215), and a being—"imagination is perhaps the most powerful human ability" (p. 86). Similarly, taken together, Sutton-Smith's (1997) rhetorics of play included aspects of play as a doing, a feeling, and a being, specifically, for example, the rhetorics of power, the self, and the imaginary, respectively.

My findings heartily endorse the archetypical doing aspect of play. As virtually all the play theorists conceive of it, I find it obvious to cite that play is considered a doing, whether in theory or in practical application (e.g., Brown, 2009; Yarnal, 2006). Like Brown, in conversations with the women, I sensed the importance of play as a doing, perhaps as a gateway into play. Brown suggested, "[o]ne of the quickest ways to jump-start play is to do something physical" (2009, p. 213). In our follow-up feedback focus group, one woman seemed to echo this sentiment, "I think playing is more of a doing" (Virginia). Doings of play are as wide ranging as our imagination, both in the literature and as experienced by the women in my study.

Feeling play is clearly evident in the thinking and writing of the play theorists. Brown (2009) wrote, "the most significant aspect of play is that it allows us to express our joy and connect more deeply with the best in ourselves, and in others. .... Play is the purest expression of love" (p. 218). One of the women in this study, Barbara, could have almost written these words herself, describing her rendering about play in her life, she said,

I think it's important to me to touch a person. To touch them physically and to touch them in here (*motions to her heart*). Fun. You must have fun in life. When you die, I don't know what happens over there. Ha ha. I love dancing. I love love.

The women in my study often expressed play as a feeling, and this manifestation of play is consistent with Sutton-Smith's (2008) later theories where play functions as a reconciliation of our lives. This finding also aligns with the conceptualization of the great play theorist Huizinga (1955) who defined play as including feelings—joy and fun. Finally, feeling play is aligned to conclusions the many studies about the Red Hats Society (e.g., Yarnal et al., 2008) and Raging Grannies (e.g., Roy, 2007) made—play engenders joy! My results concurred with Barnett's (2011-2012) suggestion that women used their play as a way to express emotions. For some women, it was even a vital means for doing so.

Perhaps feeling play might provide a way for women to cope with emotions emanating from grief and pain, for example, Anna wished her bereaved friend was able to join with “singing Pat.” Might older women's feeling play motivate them in the same way Fein suggested feelings, particularly fantasy about emotional events motivate much of child's pretend play (as cited in, Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Being play was often a way women in this study experienced play and expressed their humanity. Many of the women in this study clearly enacted play as a means of self-expression upholding the literature (e.g., Roy, 2007). The women had creative spirits using writing, sewing, quilting, among other ways, to express themselves. This finding is consistent with Brown's (2009) conception that “play lies at the core of creativity and innovation” (2009, p. 4).

The women had a difficult time distinguishing between play and playfulness and ultimately playfulness seemed to be an expression of play “as being.” Brown (2009) certainly espoused this perspective of play as a “state of mind” (p. 60) and Lieberman (1977) suggested playfulness was the “quintessence” of play. My findings mirror the Red Hats Society which

found play and playfulness to be closely aligned. The women in this study both associated playfulness with being an element of personality and closely linked it to play.

When asked to identify the difference between play and playfulness, some women indicated it was a character trait. In fact, a few women cherished the playful aspects of their own personalities as significantly enhancing their relationships. As Barnett (2011-2012) suggested, research studies have yet to be undertaken that definitely support this proposition for an older population. In contrast, some women felt playfulness could have a negative, slightly mean edge perhaps amplifying the complexity of play, and how we manifest our playfulness. This finding supported Lieberman's (1977) early studies identifying two types of playful high school aged adolescents one viewed positively (e.g., intellectually curious and enthusiastic) whereas the second were tagged by teachers as troublesome or attention-grabbing. I would suggest that play and playfulness is all of this and more.

My findings demonstrated exuberance and *joie de vivre* in abundance among several women in this study. In referring to Singer and Singer's (1990) work, Barnett (2011-2012) seemed to suggest that exuberance and *joie de vivre* – “all but disappear as playfulness moves from childhood through adolescence and into young adulthood” (p. 187). While Barnett may have been referring to external markers of play and playfulness, not only did one woman use the word exuberant in describing what play meant to her, “in other words, if it's something we do that we feel very exuberant about no matter what it is” (Victoria) but numerous other women's very being demonstrated energy, enthusiasm, and liveliness characterized by *joie de vivre*! Indeed, the milieu in my third focus group—the singing, the dancing, fist pounding—was absolutely one of exuberance! My findings align more closely with the numerous studies of the

Raging Grannies and the women of the Red Hats Society where playfulness abound (e.g., Roy, 2007; Yarnal, 2006; Yarnal et al., 2008) among older women.

My experience with the women's playful banter during the focus groups upheld Barnett's (2007) core definition of being playful: the ability to transform any situation. Using repartee, the women transformed a potential formal research space into a playful, creative, and relaxed environment.

On the face of it, the spontaneous nature of several women's playfulness seems to contradict Huizinga's (1955) perspective that play is orderly and rule bound. My findings align more consistently with Lugone's (1997) conception of play as being the attitude we bring to something that turns something into play.

The literature suggested that there may be gender differences in playful expression and suggested women might manifest play and playfulness through social bonding (Barnett, 2011-2012). While this study cannot comment on men's playfulness, Barnett's hunch was apparent in my study. Several women demonstrated their playfulness by how they related to each other and me during the focus groups. Teasing each other and me, being uninhibited and injecting emotion into our conversations were common occurrences supporting Barnett's notion that women demonstrate these particular potentially gendered aspects of playfulness.

My findings corroborate the literature that suggested playfulness is evidence of intellectual character and incites creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Glynn and Webster, 1992; Proyer & Ruch, 2011). Synder et al. (2011) identified playfulness as one of twenty-four character strengths, and at least one woman clearly identified her own playfulness as integral to her way of being and a strength she brings into important relationships. As well, several of the women who were the most playful during the focus group exhibited some of the facets of the definition

attributed to the older playful people by Yarnal and Qian (2011), for instance they were optimistic, relaxed, and they delighted in gentle teasing. Indeed Magnuson and Barnett's (2013) suggestion that playfulness seems to build resilience might be a fruitful avenue for exploration with older women as they face the challenges of ageism and ordinary changes in life circumstances.

### **Paradoxical essences of play.**

The women's experience of time flying by is well supported by the literature, from Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) flow concept to Brown's musing that "stills time's arrow" (2009, p. 218). On the other hand, the idea that the women can sometimes feel a slowing of time appears to be a different turn on understanding of time during play. We seem to attribute a positive sense to time passing quickly; whereas time going by slowly is often thought of as negative. At least one woman in this study experienced time as slowing down, perhaps a treasured moment between a woman and her granddaughter. This slowing down of time may also be related to how another woman perceived play as making time more interesting, perhaps reflective of Kleiber et al.'s (2011) description of savouring, as she considered her experiences of play.

The social aspect of play was ubiquitous, and my study wholeheartedly affirms the emerging body of literature emanating from the Red Hats Society which underscores the social aspect of play (e.g., Yarnal et al., 2008). The women's play beautifully illustrated key types of social play, particularly friendship and belonging (e.g., Brown, 2009; Yarnal et al., 2008). While my findings strongly support Huizinga's (1955) notion that play encourages social groupings, I found no evidence of secrecy or exclusivity surrounding them. Quite the contrary, for the women, play seemed to open up opportunities for social connection and belonging. Many women were open and wanted to expand their social circle.

Being with friends and having friendships were important aspects of play and engendering play with the women. Women's friendships were vital to many of the women, yet demonstrating the paradox and complexity of play, being with friends sometimes was 'not play.' Serious moments and some talk were clearly identified by some women as not play. As Green (1998) and others discovered and my study supports, friends and friendship provide women with moments of joy, feelings of camaraderie, a space to nurture the self and others, and experience empowerment. My findings unequivocally support the Red Hats Society studies that older women use play as a context for friendship and socialization.

My results supported also Yarnal et al.'s (2008) argument that play might reduce social isolation, particularly as the women both celebrated and decried the need for more leisure and recreation groups (through the city). This need became more pronounced and articulated by women without partners and as a way to extend their social circle.

Several of the women in my study developed community and social capital through their play, thus affirming Son et al.'s (2010) conclusions. As Arai and Pedlar (2003) suggested through creating networks formed around interests and not power, people are empowered to create communities. I noticed through the women's interactions with each other, for example, driving each other, helping each other, through their play and friendship, the women built important social connections that they could draw on when needed. My findings complement Glover and Parry's (2008) assertion that friendship provided expressive (emotional) social support, particularly for some women as they coped with the loss and health issues.

My findings echo the results Heuser (2005) reported for the women who lawn bowl together including physical activity (in this study for the exercisers), camaraderie, a genuine caring for others, and involvement in a community of interest (more particularly for the crafters



and quilters). Indeed women lawn bowlers who had retired still participated in the social aspect of the group and this was apparent with the more elderly women in the crafters (e.g., 95 year old Monica).

At the same time as being social, solitary play was equally important. Women infused solitary play into their day-to-day lives. For instance, women played through engagement in the arts, gardening, and reading. Several women allocated space in their homes for creative play. This aspect of play was described as self-nurturing, empowering, cognitive, and creative for the women (Brown, 2009). Echoed in my findings was Singer and Switzer's (1980) conception of daydreaming as a form of play that has restorative and transformative power for some women. At least one woman affirmed this sense of a dream state through play in her artful reflection (see Barbara's rendering on page 111).

My findings concur that humour, silliness and fun are important aspects of play. The show of humour and silliness and the idea of fun repeated itself in the embodiment of many women, through their stories, artwork, and way of being. Several scholars highlighted the fun aspect of play including Huizinga (1955) who described the essence of play as "fun" and Stalp et al. (2008) who demonstrated older women using fun to resist sexist and ageist stereotypes. Particularly in the way that humour and fun were experienced in the day-to-day lives of these women, play enhanced the lives of the women in the study. Forssén (2007) advocated that women use humour to prevent and endure pain, promote relaxation, and energize life. Even earlier, Mannell and McMahon (1982) suggested humour was a way to inject play into our everyday lives, one that leisure researchers ought to study more!

In contrast, my findings challenge Huizinga's (1955) argument that play is "not serious." Similarly, I would challenge Yarnal et al. (2008) who "strongly support[ed]" the notion that

older women's play is non-serious. The women spoke directly to the seriousness of their play, a play that can utterly absorb her, consistent with a flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). This notion of serious is also consistent with Brown's (2009) assertion that play can require effort. I wonder if the serious side of play is a way for the women to legitimize their play?

The woman gave plenty of thought and discussion to whether or not play needed to be productive. This conversation was often conceptually linked to the value and appropriateness of play. Some women viewed play as important and valued, often mirroring the thinking of Brown (2009). Others were less certain and this seemed to be driven by a perception that they ought to be doing something else, something more productive perhaps as women, perhaps as older women. I had the impression that as the women considered our conversation, and thought more deeply about play, they began to feel a softening of their stance, as one woman commented, "I should play more ... I should lighten up" (Rose). Perhaps playing, which can be perceived as purposeless, serves to reinforce the negative notion that older women are of less value, so the very notion of play becomes an act of resistance. Might women's feelings of guilt about playing be related to the notion that there are more important things they *should be doing*? Do some women feel a lack of entitlement to play as suggested in some feminist leisure literature (e.g., Fullagar, 2008)? Conversely, if older women ought not to play, according to society's conventions, then the very act of playing becomes an act of resistance whether or not the women conceived it to be that.

Based on much of the Red Hats' research, I anticipated the women to talk about play as being less appropriate for them as older women. While that seemed to resonate for some, it was more often unspoken or only alluded to. Perhaps it is not that play is inappropriate—it's that we do not expect older women to play. We might stereotypically expect older women to sew or

quilt, but not that either activity is actually considered to be play by some of the women.

Furthermore, some of the women were hesitant to define play, perhaps due to an unspoken internalization of play as inappropriate for older women. As Victoria said, “[d]o we skip?” The unsaid message, play is for children.

### **The Context of Older Women’s Lives and Play**

Many scholars and popular thinking decry that play is devalued as we age. In my study, I discovered quite the opposite, play may be devalued, but not by the players, i.e., the older women, themselves. Play was an everyday occurrence for most of the women in this study. The women were fully engaged in play—in a myriad of ways and with a diversity of meanings. Far from frivolous—although it could be that too—play held a vital role in many of the women’s lives.

In the study, play was widespread, common, and part of everyday life for most of the women. Based on the paucity of play research in the everyday lives of older women, I might have expected otherwise. Instead what I found was that many women integrated play into their everyday lives on what seemed to me to be a taken-for-granted basis. Perhaps this is a key contribution from this study, to continue to chip away and challenge the notion that play is not part of older women’s everyday lives.

My findings resoundingly corroborate the emerging literature from the Red Hats Society and others that have demonstrated the important place play has in the lives of many women. Play brings joy, friendship, social connections, resistance to ageism, empowerment, and health and well-being into older women’s lives. For instance, several of the women in my study corroborated Stalp et al’s (2008) finding that women self-nurtured (resting and relaxing) through play. Indeed the women in this study affirmed F. L. King’s (2001) work describing quilting as

self-nurturing. My findings demonstrated that play is a way some women found joy, ignited their brains, engendered friendship, and accrued health benefits, consistent with Sutton-Smith's (2008) assertion that play's positive pleasures allow us to live more fully in the world.

My findings seemed to contradict the notion that leisure activity decreases as we age, this suggestion is consistent with the musings of Kleiber et al. (2011). While I do not have a comparative measure of leisure activity for these women, did not follow them over time, and my participants may be exceptional with their play involvement, I sensed that the women's leisure involvement, particularly their play, has increased in recent years. That being said, the women were wary of declining health as a potential threat to their play in the future. Perhaps infusing their daily lives with moments of play is one way older women adapt to changing leisure lifestyles. Or perhaps in focusing our studies in leisure activities we have missed an important part of being that includes playing and continuing to play as we age. An interesting future study could explore how play changes as we age.

### **Health and well-being.**

Time and again, my findings echoed Brown (2009) who conceptualized play as important to our happiness and well-being. This is aligned with results stemming from research with the Raging Grannies (e.g., Hutchinson & Wexler, 2007; Narushima, 2004) and the women of the Red Hats Society (e.g., Son et al., 2007). This study endorsed, and I echo Brown's message encouraging adults to engage in play for health and well-being benefits.

On the whole, by their own self-assessment and through my interactions and observations, the women I spoke to are living well and thriving in their old age. I sensed their play has been an important contributor to their well-being—to their being. Indeed my research demonstrated play engenders joy, which as Cohn et al. (2009) contended, joyful lived

experiences can build resources to cope with illness and depression. As Heuser (2005) found, so did I—the women tended to their needs for community and camaraderie, felt joy, and nurtured their physical bodies through play.

Some women's mental health issues seemed to be both eased and constrained by play, some of the time. The complexity and paradoxical nature of play is clearly evident in this woman's reflection, "and so this is life at play, but it's not always what's in my head or heart, unfortunately." Through reading and writing (which the woman described in her meaning and experience of play) this same woman often used play to resist her stress and depression. The context of her life—her mental health issues—shaped how play was perceived and lived in her life. Parry's (2008) and Fullagar's (2008) assertion that leisure was demonstrated to help people living with serious illness is endorsed by my findings. Thus Burghardt's (2010) black and white criteria that the player must be free of stress or chronic illness (in order to play) seems to lack the nuance that more aptly described the play experiences for the women in this study. When the women felt able, play acted as a balm, aligning closely with Fullagar's (2008) concept that leisure can be a "counter-depressant" for women. Play is one answer to Dupuis' (2008) call for us to investigate ways older people can live well despite illness or disability.

Play was a tool the women in my study used to ignite their brain and learn new skills. This finding supports Brown's (2009) writing, "[l]earning itself is enhanced by play" (p. 100). It also aligns particularly well with the older women in Narushima's (2004) studies which also noted the learning experiences of the Raging Grannies.

My findings clearly corroborate with the psycho-social benefits ascribed to play through the Red Hats Society (Son et al., 2007). As Hutchinson et al. (2008) noted, Red Hatters use play

as a coping mechanism and this was echoed by several women in my study, often as a means for social support. Some women used their creative, solitary play as a means of coping with stress. The adaptive power of play was demonstrated during the arts-based research as one woman reshaped the activity from arts-based to talk-based to suit her play style (Brown, 2009). As Brown said, “[a]uthentic play comes from deep down inside us” (2009, p. 104).

### **Being older women.**

Through their lived experiences and meanings of play, the women in my research highlighted just one aspect of how older women are multi-faceted complex beings (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003). The women in this study were both empowered and constrained by being older women.

Several women exhibited a strong ethic of care for their families, friends, and communities while at the same time being quite aware of the constraints that embodies. As a woman wrote in response to my question about their well-being, “[i]t has been a blessing to help people, and to care for my family.” Women cared for grandchildren both for responsibility they felt and the joy it gave them. This finding clearly aligns with Bella’s (1992) explanation that while gendered roles are transforming, “women’s emotional commitment to the maintenance and nurturance of relationships has remained” (p. 233).

Many women valued their caregiving roles, yet, sometimes they resisted its more mundane aspects (e.g., the dust bunnies can wait!). If women often have an eye or attunement to the domestic operations of their homes and families, they may not be able to fully immerse themselves in play (Henderson & Allen, 1991). Without full engagement in their play, I wonder if the women are able to wholly realize the joy of play?

Some of the women used their play as a way to resist gendered expectations. This finding is consistent with many writers who argue leisure can be a site of resistance for women (e.g., Shaw, 2001). Indeed there is even paradoxical notions of conformity and resistance in within and across the women as some conform to women's work like preparing meals for spouses while not worrying about a dirty house.

I experienced many of the women as empowered, and their play clearly gave them meaning, freedom, and a sense of self-identity upholding Henderson et al.'s (2012) notion of leisure as a context for empowerment. Indeed, this supports the experience of the women of the Red Hats Society and Raging Grannies who gained a sense of personal and group empowerment through their play (e.g., Roy, 2007; Son & Yarnal, 2011).

There were times that the women experienced guilt in the midst of their play, yet I am uneasy expressing this as "oppression" as I believe the women in my study would be uncomfortable or even reject the strength and harshness the term conveys. As Andrews (2002) suggested and I experienced, it is a fine balance in representing the women I spoke with and the potential patriarchal and power dynamic the woman may or may not have paid attention to or accepted in their lives. I wonder if some women's guilt impedes their ability to savour play.

The women in heterosexual married relationships shared domestic responsibilities with their husbands to varying degrees. Some cared for ill husbands, others felt responsible to clean or cook and others did not feel bound to follow traditional or socially prescribed women's work in the home. There seemed to be much variability with the degree of caregiving and domestic work the women felt compelled to fulfill. This finding might reflect a change in society or empowerment at the personal level with women like Emily, who had the "talk" with her

husband. Perhaps Emily's "talk" is akin to Bella's (1992) pragmatic suggestion that we discuss our values with our loved ones in order to share responsibility and assign accountability.

If I consider patriarchy to "thrive<s> through its ability to assign people to categories and then to instill shame about their supposed label" (Mitchell & Bruns, 2011, p. 125), then my research confirmed several women experience patriarchy in their lives. A poignant moment happened as one woman explained "I've let, probably let my kids down by not providing them with a father figure. Uhhh... but I also feel that there must be something in you, that's like, 'I'm not a good enough human.'" All these years later, this woman held her grief tightly, her personal despair no doubt at least partly informed by societal familist expectations (Bella, 1992).

Older women were in fact rendered genderless by a few of the women themselves. This sense of no differences, sometimes not even being able to distinguish men from women might be a result of the patriarchal devaluation of women. As well, other women feared appearing "stupid" in front of their family for not understanding technology. Our conversation about hair dying also hinted at patriarchal notions of what is attractive (i.e., a younger woman). Some women I spoke with dyed their hair to erase signs of ageing (Furman, 1999) while many did not colour their hair.

### **Ageing.**

I sensed the women's resistance to the notion of ageing seemed to be rooted in the tragedy discourse (Carroll, 2007). Indeed several women in my study conformed to the notion that ageing is something they wished to avoid, and I sensed few were ready to accept their "oldness" (Carroll, 2007). In the context of our discussions, the women seemed less interested in retaining their youth and more worried about the declines they associated with ageing. My findings more aptly affirm Arber and Ginn's (1991) conception that it is this stereotypically



negative view of being older that people reject. The physical and mental health declines that seem to singularly define ageing (Holstein & Minkler, 2003) seem to be what the women in my study reject most. Several women expressed trepidation about ageing, expressly worried about becoming dependent. Dionigi's (2006) contention that our society idolizes health and independence and devalues ageing was clearly upheld by the women in this study.

How the women experience older age was complex and varied. Many women did not refer to themselves as old, consistent with research presented by Dionigi, Horton, and Bellamy (2011) and Carroll (2007). Several women spoke of feeling the same as they always had on the inside, ageless, as Kaufman (1986) named it. Despite resistance to labeling themselves as old, for some of the women, my findings resonated more with Andrews' (1999) conception that for some, ageing is a growing more deeply into the self, not the same self, rather a more mature, developed self. Some attributed part of their ageing to growing as people, being wiser, more empathic and caring while others did not attribute this kind of growth to be part ageing, rather they felt as if they were still just the same person, only improved. The difference did not seem to one of semantics, I felt an intangible difference in interpretations of feeling age and being older.

As I embarked on this research project, I struggled with how I might refer to the people in my study. How would I label or name them older women, old woman? I have come to feel most comfortable simply calling the participants "women." Having a descriptive label seems much less important as I have interacted with and gotten to know the women in this study. Being older is one piece of their being, but only a piece.

As much as some women did not necessarily want to define themselves as old, getting older provided some benefits. Age provided some of the women with freedom—freedom to play more—than they did at earlier times in their lives. In their study, Gibson, Ashton-Shaeffer,

Green and Autry (2003) described freedom of choice “the defining characteristic” to older women’s leisure (p. 221). Freedom was perceived as important; however, it did not hold centre stage in the women’s meanings or experiences of play in this study.

The conception that adults need to play more (Brown, 2009), is a given, a reality in the lived experience for many women in this study. If play is often thought of as a diversion for adults (e.g., Sutton-Smith, 1997), I would contest that my research suggests play was much more to most of the older women in this study. Of course my sample was particular, but how intriguing if these women are but a window into the lives of many other older women play!

On the other hand, what if these women are unique and many more women are like Sara or those who sometimes experience guilt or conflict about care—women who perhaps do not give themselves full permission to play. Amplifying Dupuis’ (2008) call, as governments and others strive to encourage older people to be physically active, might there be a tremendous, widely accessible opportunity to encourage, in policy and practice, older women to *play* more, in whatever manifestation suit them. Perhaps more women do feel straightjacketed into the notion that older women do not play, should not play. I wonder if it would be a relief, an opening if we showed older women at play.

### **Ageism.**

Overwhelmingly the women I spoke to experienced ageism in their everyday lives (e.g., Carroll, 2007; Garner, 1999; Gubrium & Holstein, 2003; MacDonald & Rich, 1983). The women spoke of our culture as youth oriented and as such felt diminished. This perspective echoes Calasanti’s (2009) perspective,

That societies are organized on the basis of age is widely accepted....Analytically, this implies that old age does not simply exacerbate existing inequalities but is instead embedded in age-based power relations such that being old, in and of itself, confers a loss

of power for all those designated as ‘old’ regardless of their possible advantages on other social hierarchies” (pp. 474-475).

The women were treated differently in their everyday interactions, not only because they are women, but also, and particularly *because* they are old.

I am distressed yet perhaps a little unsurprised at how little progress we as a society (me as an individual) have made to combat ageism. The words of the women in my study reflect almost exactly those reported by Garner (1999) or Narushima (2004) that older women are perceived as no longer useful. Ditto the notion reported by MacDonald and Rich (1983) that older women are invisible; decades later older women continue to feel shunted aside.

My research confirmed Angus and Reeve’s (2006) notion that ageism obscures who people really are (imagine, Christine at that age, a hiker!). My study affirmed the gathering evidence that play is an important space for older women to age well and to resist ageist and gendered stereotypes. In a small way, this study contributes to the emerging literature about older women’s play, particularly outside formal venues in their everyday lives, perhaps in the long term building towards new images and ideas of older women.

Participants in Cheang’s (2002) study congregated at a fast food restaurant and perceived people who were involved at senior’s centres to be “old” and the facilities themselves to be overly structured and programmed. My mother-in-law refuses to become involved in her local community centre—“*those* people are old and have no family or friends” to interact with. I must admit, a sliver of this thought, wormed into my mind as I approached the community centre for the first time to recruit participants for this study. The women were vibrant, engaging, bright, and old, actually, *no matter what the women might have been like*, I am still abashed! There is clearly a need to address stereotypes attached to community centres targeted to older adults.

In their dress-up, the Red Hats Society and Raging Grannies clearly use costume and play as they band together to become visible. The women in my study were less obvious, more matter of fact in their everyday use of play and playfulness to question and challenge society's ageist perceptions (e.g., being silly in the dollar store with teens or making the suggestion they do "wheelies" in front of police). The Raging Grannies and Red Hats Society showed playful older women abound particularly in groups. Many women in this study demonstrated that playful older women are everywhere!

I did find some support for Angus and Reeve's (2006) and MacDonald and Rich's (1983) contention that we pass ageist beliefs through our society without consideration. Some women, occasionally laughed off their inability to do (e.g., keep up with electronic devices like cameras or computers) *because* of their age as opposed to bearing down and doing the learning and practice it might take to learn a new skill.

## **Methods Considerations**

### **Arts-based methods.**

In bringing together phenomenology and arts-based research, my goal was to deepen and enrich my exploration of the meaning, experience, and place of play in the day-to-day lives of older women. Through engagement and expression, I believe I accomplished my aim. As the women shared their renderings with the group, each was personally drawn into our conversation sharing their own play and life experiences.

I experienced and observed the injection of arts-based research to induce the women and me into a relaxing environment, an entrance into an altered state, away from the formal research environment into something else, a playful state. From my journal, I described how the space felt while the women created their art, "[s]ometimes quiet and thoughtful, solitary – hearing a pin

drop, other times raucous and rowdy, social. Other times between two friends quietly conversing. Sometimes a mixture of all of those things” (September 11, 2013). My thoughts foretold aspects of the essences of play—layered, complex, and paradoxical.

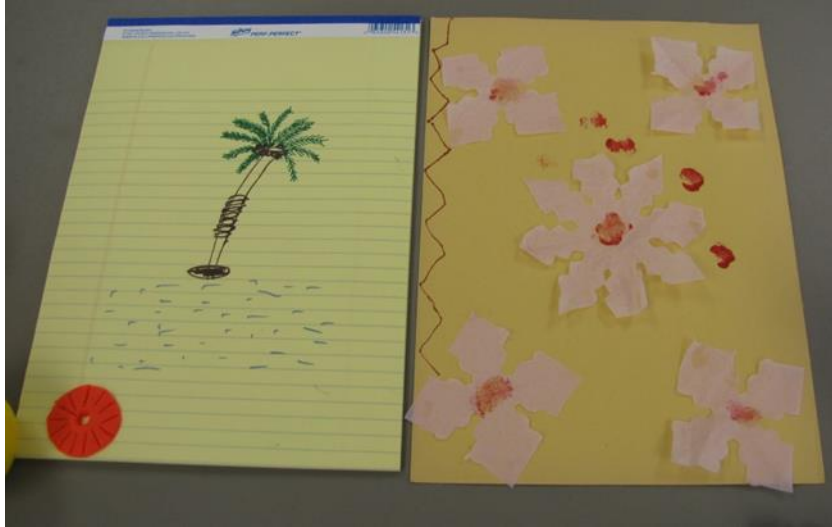
Right from the outset, most of the women fully embraced the art activity, with a few exceptions. We seemed to be able to stimulate actual play, for example when I asked Victoria how she experienced the activity, she responded,

[y]es, I think at first, what I am going to do? It was a little bit like work, but once I got into, had time to begin to think about what it is that I wanted to do, then, it became more playful. Yes definitely, it became more playful. It brought back memories of why I am doing these things.

In her comment, Victoria demonstrated that the activity began as reflective and evolved into a play experience. When I asked Sandra, “[h]ow’s it going,” she answered, “[i]t’s not.” Art was not play for Sandra and she struggled to begin and was visibly stressed. As Sandra chatted with the other women and me, reminiscing about taking her grandchildren on the train and playing horseshoes with friends at the cottage she settled into doing a poster (mixing collage and writing words, see her rendering on page 110). In using arts-based methods, I believe it is essential to follow the lead of the participants, to find a way in if possible, and to let go if need be.

My findings aligned beautifully with the notion that using the arts in research provokes and engages the participants (e.g., Finley, 2008; Jipson & Paley, 2008). As some women struggled to define what play might mean for themselves as older women, I believe using and placing the art activity at the beginning of the groups opened the women’s minds to the notion of play.

Within the group setting, through the art activity the women were able to reflect on their own personal experience and ideas about play. For instance, Sara, the woman who perceived herself not to play, drew a picture of a palm tree representing her childhood when she *did* play.



Sara's creative renderings

An academic research study is often (or perceived to be) formal; however, the arts transformed the environment, seemingly opening and relaxing the women and me. My findings resoundingly affirm Eisner's (2008) belief that arts-based research elicits empathy among the researcher and the researched. I perceived the women felt able to share their thoughts about play, ageing, and being women in a non-judgmental, caring, and safe environment. I experienced the women as supportive of each other and me as we moved through our discussions.

The art encouraged empathy among the women. For instance, the women helped each other find images for their collage and supported each other as they shared their reflections during the show and tell segment of the focus group. As Sandra shared her reflection she commented, "[w]ow everybody is so interesting. Mine is so boring." Tess replied, "[n]o no." Sandra continued, "I guess my life just revolves around my grandkids all the time." In this dialogue Tess reassured Sandra that her reflection is acceptable and secondly affirmed her with this response, "that's exciting" (Tess). Similarly after Sara shared her artwork, Gloria responded, "[l]et's see, hold it up. Oh, that's nice. I like that. That's good. I like you tissue

paper flowers. I like that. That's good. It's nice. Yeah. Nice, very nice. Good job." My sense was that it was in sharing not only a piece of themselves through words or images, but also in effortful creativity, a kindness and generosity of spirit enveloped the space. Furthermore, with active, hands-on participation, the women seemed to have a stake in the discussion.

I believe arts-based methods set the stage to bring our conversation to a truly collaborative, deeper, and more personally meaningful level for both the women and me. The art seemed to be a pathway into more difficult conversations. Using arts-based research, I believe the women were given an opening to express complex, sometimes difficult feelings. For example, Rose's painting initiated a conversation about solitary play and feelings of loneliness, as she shared her painting with the women, this dialogue ensued,

me: Tell us about your play. Is artistry play for you?

Rose: Yes it is. It's a solitary thing. You know, you spend a lot of time alone. And I do spend a lot of time alone. But I'm never lonely though

....

Christine: I don't know, it gives you a feeling of um, a good feeling.

Rose: it's a lonely place too, right. There's nobody on the beach

Christine: Ah, that's right.

me: So, for you play is more of a solitary thing?

Rose: Yeah,

me: As opposed to a social,

Rose: I play alone.

As I thought about this conversation later, I might have missed an opposed opportunity to gently take this conversation deeper to discuss how Rose's artistic expression might help her cope with loneliness. Rose may or may not have embarked on the discussion, I'll never know. Anna's performance—singing and dancing—during our show and tell segment might have been sparked through the open, safe space created by the art activity. Anna's open presentation of her artist rendering led us to a discussion about loss, all this to say this study fully supports the use of arts-based methods to delve deeper into a topic.

The arts activity stimulated the women into telling and sharing their stories, as T. King (2008) predicted. As they shared their renderings, many women narrated their depictions with stories. Through their stories of play, I came to know important aspects of the women's selves. Sometimes these stories affirmed Weber's (2008) notion that the arts articulate what is difficult to say as evidenced by Virginia's discussion about her creative reflection "so this is life at play, but it's not always what's in my head or heart, unfortunately."

**For the women in this study.**

I set out with the hope that the women in my study might feel empowered through introspection, sharing, and discussion about their lives. My impression is that the women enjoyed the focus groups, felt empowered by expressing their perspectives, sharing their lives, and being heard. In answer to my question, what was this experience like for you? Barbara generously wrote, "a very worthwhile experience—an opportunity to share in defining play/playfulness." Virginia kindly offered, "[f]ascinating, enlightening to hear other people's input. Fun." Tess wrote, "very interesting and meaningful as well as fun." Anna replied, "just great. Talking about things. ... not to stay home, be involved." Christine wrote, "I really enjoyed discussing play and playfulness in a group setting. ... I realize that other women feel similar to myself." Sharon responded, "[t]his was a fun experience and made me think about everyday activities as being fun. Nice to hear the experiences or fun concepts of other people." Barbara also offered, "[p]lay in my family relationship is crucial, I will keep playing."

Sandra, the woman who initially experienced the arts activity as stressful, chose to participate and reveled in her participation. As Sandra wrote on her feedback form, "[i]nteresting. Finding things you have in common with other elderly people. Get the word out, age is only a number. Keep on with this with other people (input) works."



In our follow up feedback focus group Virginia exclaimed, “[o]h, I really enjoyed it, I enjoyed all this.” Based on the women’s feedback and witnessing their participation and discussions, particularly hearing each other speak about ageism, their experiences and lives, I am quite certain many left our discussion feeling invigorated, even wanting more, and I believe a few even left feeling empowered. In the follow-up group I asked the women if they had thought further about our discussion, Virginia responded,

Actually I suppose I did. . . . Every time my granddaughter comes I think about you. I think; “Oh, I’m playing right now.” Hahahaha. And I do. I analyze the way we’re playing and stuff like that. . . . So yeah, it has been an intriguing experience thinking about it. And I think about the silly collage I made and I think maybe I didn’t put the right things on that paper. You know? But that’s also myself second guessing myself which is also a part of me, who I am.

Further thinking about play in her life led Virginia to reflect about other aspects of her being.

When we met a second time, Connie told us that she shared her focus group experience with her husband,

and this also helped me because going south and travelling in a car with your husband for 11 hours, what do you talk about? Hahahah! We talked about different things too and I think that it helped me. . . . so we had a couple chuckles on the way.

I also hoped the focus group might open a playful space for the women involved in this study, while I feel confident we achieved this goal, I appreciate that many of the women in this study create playful spaces wherever they go!

**For the researcher—me.**

I have grown immeasurably as a result of the full experience of my graduate work, culminating in this thesis. Focusing on this study, my growth has occurred most notably on two fronts: knowledge and emotion.

My knowledge has expanded from a technical and conceptual perspective. Technically my interviewing and moderating skills are developing and becoming more practiced; my writing

skills improve page by page. As I have always needed to, I must remember to slow and quiet myself, to hold still and just be during emotional moments, and to listen better. Understandably during the focus groups I was a nervous novice; however, a dwelling in the moment might have deepened our conversations and my understandings.

My ambiguity about labeling myself a feminist and not being well schooled in feminism has been enormously challenging for me. Understanding its tenets, applying its theories and in interpreting my findings, I have been tentative and grappled with how to live up to the ideals of being a feminist. Also overlapping my own reticence were the women themselves for whom I perceived their response to feminism might be even more complex. I believe the women and I affirmed DeVault and Gross's (2012) conceptualization of a feminist interview as an "encounter between women with common interests" (p. 211).

My understanding of play—the theoretical and the lived experience of older women's play—has grown in leaps and bounds. This project introduced me to thinkers and concepts that crystalized my worldview. I am gladdened and inspired by how large and wide play is in the lives of nearly all of the women with whom I spoke. What I hoped and held true, that play is one way to help us live well into our old age, is indeed fruitful for so many! My heart leapt with joy listening to the stories of the women I met, my eyes welled with tears hearing tales of struggle with mental health issues, and my mind filled with embarrassment and frustration at the shadow and voice of my own and society's ageism.

How can I, how can we, tap into the hearts and minds of older women? I am keenly interested and awakened to the need to in my own life and in challenging myself to consider how I might personally contribute to change. My heightened self-awareness is amplified by hearing

the feminist's call to *do* something (e.g., Browne, 1998; Hesse-Biber, 2012). The women in this study had clear advice: do more research, speak to us, share our lives.

I have a deeper, more personal awareness of the pain and frustration ageism engendered in some women. As a result of this study, the women's voices echo in my head as I wonder, how can I, how can society, diminish the stigma of ageing? I am moved by Barbara's words on her feedback sheet, "more discussions like this—more opportunities to 'play' and not feel guilty. Keep working to enhance life for aging women—and what about men?" Christine's word echo too, "I wish that we could change society's view of older women. I don't like being called an 'old woman' or being demeaned in anyway."

How can we move away from the tragedy discourse of ageing? Charlotte's words haunt me,

Don't talk about yourself as an old person. I always remember interviewing a group of women for a job that I had when I was working. And I wanted two people, and in the end I chose a woman. She was 53. And when I asked her if she would like to take the job, her reaction was "You're going to give this job to an old woman like me?" And I thought, she's 53. (Virginia: That's not old.) No. That attitude doesn't help. If people are always moaning on about how they're too old to do things. Oh you know, my poor old bones and all this sort of talk. You don't need to do that. (Virginia: No, I agree. That turns people off. Connie: Yup.) We ourselves could do an awful lot to change this attitude. ... At what point in your life do you become an older woman? What is the day that it switches?

I am troubled by Charlotte's words as Jacobs poem beats in my head, "I am an old woman, a long lived woman. I'm proud of it. I revel in it" (as cited in Browne, 1998, p. 260). As DeVault and Gross (2012) instructed, "allow[ing] that information to affect you, baffle you, haunt you, make you uncomfortable, and take you on unexpected detours" (p. 216). I am on that road.

At the outset of my study I was confounded by what to name the participants—older women, senior, or even old women. The choice weighed heavily upon me, and it remains so. Almost immediately, as I interviewed the women, the descriptors melted away. At the heart, the

women were human beings, much more than their age or their gender. This realization is not new for me (or others!), yet I am reminded again how a label can both limit and expand. How can I give voice to the lived experiences, indeed to celebrate the women in my study to expand a perception of the label older women?

### **Future research directions.**

Given our ageing population and lack of research about old women's play, there continue to be fruitful opportunities to demonstrate play as one way for older women to age well. There is an opportunity to explore play with older women who do not play, to understand their perspectives. The little play research we do have with older women tends to be focused on a White, able-bodied, middle class demographic. New research is needed to understand how a variety of groups, older women from nonwestern cultures, older women with health issues or disabilities, older women living with lower incomes, as examples, perceive and experience play. What does play mean in their day-to-day lives? Given the significant ageism that older women experience, I would suggest there is an opportunity to discover ways to use play as a tool in repositioning ageing women.

Drawn by my own misperceptions, the Cheang (2002) study, and inspired by the women in this study, there is an opportunity to create a participatory action research (PAR) project with older women to reveal what community senior's centres are really like. Further, it is apparent from the women in this study, a desire to expand existing program offerings for older women, perhaps begging the political question not only in the city where the study took place, but perhaps also with other communities. I perceive older women to be ripe for activism and involvement in future research.

There continues to be a critical need to find ways to change the tragedy ageing discourse so prevalent in our society. We need to find ways to make visible and humanize the spectrum of older women's lives.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this chapter I discussed how my findings aligned with existing literature, suggested what the findings might contribute to our knowledge, and my thoughts about future research. Much of this study confirmed and expanded existing ideas about older women's play; albeit in a way concretized by the lived experiences of these nineteen older women.

Conceiving of older women's play as complex and paradoxical, within and across individual women, appears to be a unique contribution from this study. I discovered play to be interconnected in three ways: as a doing, a feeling, and a being. Woven into and surrounding the women's play were paradoxes that characterized the experience, meaning, and place of play in their everyday lives: time flies by and time slows, productive and unproductive, social and solitary, and serious and silly. This articulation of older women's play seems to be relatively novel.

A key finding emerging from this study was the notion that women infused their day-to-day lives with play. In addition, asserting the idea that play can be serious challenges and expands the emergent Red Hats Literature that focuses on the silly, fun aspect of play. This finding also reinforced the use of play for a serious end—activism—demonstrated by the play of the Raging Grannies. Playfulness in older women has been studied to a limited extent, so this study provided some exploration on the topic.

The musings in the literature about play as inappropriate or disappearing as we age simply does not hold up. Neither has it for many writers and thinkers like Brown (2009) or the many who study the Red Hats Society (e.g., Yarnal, 2006) or the Raging Grannies (e.g., Roy,

2007). Perhaps as we embrace older women as players and look for ways to illuminate the rich, complex, and paradoxical lives of older women, we will challenge the stereotypes and construct a more expansive understanding of older women's everyday lives.

My study of play flourished (thanks in part) due to the injection of arts-based methods into my research methodology. Implementing arts-based research into this study with older women proved to be a fruitful and innovative method. Arts-based methods served to invigorate and engage the women and me, and transformed the research environment into a comfortable, open, space to play and be playful, share, gather, and build knowledge. I believe arts-based methods spoke to Cohen's (1993) call to play with play.

This study explored play through the lived experiences, words, stories, and art of older women which is a unique gaze compared to the emerging literature about older women's play emanating from the Red Hats Society or other social groups which tend to focus on benefits accrued from play in these social groups. Women's stories and experiences show the richness of growing old and make a contribution to our knowledge of older women and their lives.

Through the very nature of its integration into the everyday lives of women, play is one window into being and living as older women. My challenge now is to find ways to share my research; the particular experiences, stories, and voices the women entrusted with me; to illuminate the complex, paradoxical, and wonderful world of older women's play. In doing so, to nudge forward my own and perhaps others' perceptions of ageing and share a surprising vision (to everyone except the women themselves!) that play is appropriate, ordinary, everyday—*natural* to many older women.

I set out with the hope that my research might shine a light on play as one way women might age well. Indeed, play often brought fleeting moments and lasting memories of joy,

wonder, growth, health, and love into the lives of the women it touched. This study spoke to Dupuis' (2008) call for research on a broader range of leisure activities among older people and as Holstein and Minkler (2003) implored, in the voice and perspective of older women. Perhaps making play visible, appropriate, and even desirable in the lives of older women may render an appealing vision of old (Carroll, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience and meaning of play and playfulness to older women, and its place in their day-to-day lives. Together with four groups of women; with insight and guidance from Sherry, my family, and friends; and upon my analysis and reflection; I believe I have accomplished my aim.

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## **Appendix A: Discussion Guide**

### **Room set up**

Ideally the seating configuration will be a round or square table to facilitate conversation. I will have bowls of candy (for colour and eating), jugs of water or water bottles. There will be magazines, construction paper, coloured shapes, markers, and assorted art supplies on the table for activities, and paper and pens placed at each seat. I will have items that suggest a playful environment, for example, a few different sized balls, tactile materials (e.g., sand in frames, clay, desk toys), books, perhaps a board game or two, and a deck of cards. I will bring a few small paintings to lean against a wall, perhaps a side table will be set with flowers. An information handout including the consent form and short demographic survey will be at each chair.

### **Welcome and introduction (15-20 minutes)**

Thank you for coming today. My name is Karla Minello and I am a master's student at the University in recreation and leisure studies. The overall goal for my research and learning is to explore the experience and meaning of play for older women, and its place in their day-to-day lives. I'm hopeful we'll have an interesting and fun time for the next 3 or 4 hours. We'll talk, do some art, and tell our stories too.

In front of you is handout which includes information about my project, today's focus groups, a quick personal information survey, and a consent of participation form. Would everyone please read through the package now? Please complete the personal information survey, and read and sign the consent of participation form before we get started. Does anyone have any questions? May I please collect your consent forms and information surveys? I will check that each woman has signed a consent form.



Just a little housekeeping before we start, the washrooms are...., please feel comfortable to stand up and stretch or walk around if you like. Your participation is voluntary, so if you want or need to leave at any time, please feel free. Now and then I might jot down a few notes, and I have a flip chart here too. With your permission, we'll audio record the session so that I can go back over our discussion later. I will also take some photographs of the work we create later. I welcome and invite your feedback, as we go along and later. We will talk more about that at the end of our conversation.

I want to ensure this space feels safe for all of us to talk, question, and play together. Everything you say will be held in strict confidentiality. Given the group format of this session I ask you to keep in confidence information that identifies or could potentially identify a fellow participant and her comments. *Pause.* There are no right or wrong answers in our conversation today. We all have different experiences, perspectives, and opinions. *Pause.* What do you need from me or each other to ensure this space feels safe for you?

### **Group Introductions (25-30 minutes)**

Our first activity is introductions. Please write your name on the folded paper in front of you. Beside your name, please jot down a word or an image that you associate with the words play or playfulness. (Give the group a minute or so to complete this activity.) Let's go around the table, please introduce yourself and describe what you associated with play or playfulness on your sheet.

### **Arts-base Play Reflective Activity (20-30 minutes)**

To reflect about play and playfulness on a personal level, I want each of us to participate in a creative-arts activity. First, I'd like you to think about a recent experience you would describe as play. What is happening? Where are you? Who are you with? How do you feel?

How is time experienced? How is the space experienced? For the next twenty minutes or so, please create a visual or narrative representation—a story—that reflects this play experience for you or what play means for you. You can create a collage, draw a picture, do a doodling, write a reflection, a poem, a story, an anagram, you can create anything at all—the theme is play in your life. The rendering might represent what play means to you. Or it might be about how you feel when at play. It could be about play experiences you’ve had in the past, or something more recent. I have magazines, pictures, words, bits of odds and ends, markers, papers, tape, scissors, and glue. I’d like you to take a few minutes to do your piece and then afterwards we will go around the table and share our reflections of play. Please remember, the pieces are about play and playfulness in your life, not your artistic sensibility or ability!

On the flip chart, written with coloured markers will be the prompting questions. I will also have the questions photocopied onto coloured paper.

### **“Show and Tell” (45-60 minutes)**

Now we are going to play “show and tell.” I invite each of you to share your reflections. What is depicted in your art? If the discussion needs prompting, I will ask, “What does play mean to you? How do you experience play?”

I want you to think about how you felt as you created your pieces. “How were you feeling when you were creating the art? Was this activity play for you, or not play? How so? How did you experience time during the activity? How did you experience your surroundings, the room, the material available, the group? How did it feel to express yourself in this way?”

Let’s put all our reflections together. In thinking about our reflections of play and playfulness as a group, what themes or commonalities do you see across our groups’ reflections?

Wow! I appreciate your thoughts and creativity! (*Respond to how I'm feeling in that moment.*) The pieces are meaningful depictions and reflections about play in your lives, and they will really help me in my research about play.

### **Open Discussion about Play and Playfulness (45-60 minutes)**

Now I'd like to have an open dialogue about play and playfulness. "How does play differ from being playful for you? How are you playful in your everyday life? What does being playful mean to you?"

In thinking about the place of play and playfulness in our lives, "What might your reflections and meaning of play say about you as a woman? How does being a woman affect your play and ability to play or be playful? What might your reflections and meanings of play say about you as you age? How does being an older woman affect your ability to play or be playful? What role might play have in challenging stereotypes of women/older women? What other challenges prevent or limit your ability to play and play the way you would like to play? What type of things effect your ability to play the way you would like to in your everyday life? How has your play changed over the years? What place or role does play have in your life today?"

Lastly, I want to make sure that I've given everyone the opportunity to share what you'd like about play or playfulness, "What else would you like to tell me about play or playfulness in your everyday life?"

### **Feedback (20 to 30 minutes)**

To help me understand how you perceived our conversation today and to get your feedback, I would like to have a discussion about today's focus group. First, I'd like each of us to take a few minutes to fill out this reflection and afterwards we can discuss your feedback as a

group. Distribute reflection form (Appendix L) to everyone and give a few minutes for the women to complete. After everyone is finished, I will start the discussion with, “I’m interested in hearing about your experience in the focus group today. What was this experience like for you? How would you describe the experience, as play, not play, work, or something else? What worked? What did not work for you? What, if anything, has changed for you? What suggestions do you have for me?”

After our discussion is finished, I will ask the women for their sheets and point out participants are welcome to sign the reflection sheet or not.

### **Ending (10 to 15 minutes)**

Thank you for sharing your experiences and thoughts about play and playfulness today. I have learned so much from you, and I am grateful for your openness, generosity, and opinions! (*Again, respond to how I’m feeling in that moment.*) “What last questions do you have about my project?”

In terms of next steps, within the next four months I will write a summary of our focus group discussion. At that time, I hope you will read the summary and give me any feedback you might have. You can contact me via email, mail, or by telephone on a 1-800-208-3826 (my office phone number through Grade Learning)—my contact information is on the handout. You are also welcome to contact my supervisor, Sherry Dupuis, if you wish.

“May I take photographs of your creations?” As we talked about at the outset, any photographs I use in conjunction with my research will be recorded anonymously with your permission. My time estimate for the focus groups is 3 to 4 hours.

## **Appendix B: Information Summary for Women Participants**

### **The Experience, Meaning, and Place of Play and Playfulness in the Day-to-Day Lives of Older Women**

#### ***Information Summary Handout for Women Participants***

My name is Karla Minello and I am a Master's student in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo. I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Sherry Dupuis, a professor at the university who specializes in leisure in later life and leisure and health. I worked for 25 years in marketing and business and always hoped to make a meaningful career change. I returned to university at the age of 51 to pursue a lifelong dream to study well-being from a holistic perspective. I have been inspired by my own mother who lived a full and engaging life and died in 2007 at the age of 87. As an ageing woman myself, I want to explore ways that I can live well. For me that means exploring the experience, meaning and place of play and playfulness in the day-to-day lives of older women.

#### **Why is this project being conducted?**

Some argue play is a means of not only living well but expressing our humanity, yet play is often devalued as we age. Research has virtually ignored play for older women, and the role play has in their lives. I am interested in filling this gap in our research by exploring with you what play and playfulness means to you, how it has changed for you over the years, what things affect your ability to play and the role of play and playfulness in your life.

#### **Who can participate in this study?**

I am looking for women, aged 60 years and over. Regardless of whether you play, are playful, or do not play at all, I am interested in talking with you about meanings of play. Participants should be willing to sign an informed consent form to participate in this project.

#### **What will be asked of participants in the project?**

You will be asked to participate in a group discussion with me and 4—6 other women that explores what play means to you as a woman, how play has changed over the course of your life, and what supports or hinders your ability to play. The focus group session should last approximately three to four hours in length and will take place at the University of Waterloo. Your travel or parking costs will be covered. In order to explore play and playfulness in a more creative way, you will be asked to reflect on a recent or past play experience and to create an artistic rendering of that play experience. Participants can choose to create a collage, draw a picture, write a poem, do a doodling, write a reflection, a poem, a story, create an anagram—or create anything at all that reflects what play means to you in your day-to-day life! I am not interested in the artistic quality of the renderings. I am most interested in what the renderings tell or show us about what play means and how it is experienced for women. Also, I hope with this activity to inject some fun into the session.

I would like to audio record the group discussions so I make sure I adequately capture your information. Quotes from the discussion may be used in the development of research and educational materials but only if you provide consent to use your quotes.

### **What you should know about your participation in this study?**

- Your participation is completely voluntary.
- You can refuse to answer any questions you want and may decline contributing to the session in other ways if you so wish.
- There are no known or anticipated risks to your participation in this session.
- As a volunteer, you are free to stay or go at any time. You may withdraw from participating by advising me. Should you decide during the session or at a later date that you would prefer that the information you shared with us not be included in the research or educational materials, you can contact me and your information/stories/artwork will be removed.
- The artwork or renderings you create during the session belong to you. You will be asked for permission to photocopy or photograph your rendering for possible use in research or educational materials. The photos of the renderings will only be used if you provide consent to do so.
- All information you provide will be considered confidential and grouped with responses from other participants. You can choose a pseudonym for yourself that will be used in research and educational forums.
- Given the group format of this session, all participants will be asked to keep in confidence information that identifies or could potentially identify a participant and her comments. Before the group sessions begins, all participants will be asked to keep what is heard and observed in the session confidential by not sharing what is discussed or observed during the session with others outside of the group.
- The meeting will be audio recorded.
- The information gathered from the focus groups will be retained for 3 years in a secure location. Any personally identifying information will be removed from the stored data.

### **Who to contact should you have any questions about the study?**

If you have any questions or concerns about this project, please contact me at [mminello@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:mminello@uwaterloo.ca) or (800) 208-3826. Alternatively, please feel free to contact my supervisor, Dr. Sherry Dupuis at 519-888-4567, Ext.36188 or [sldupuis@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:sldupuis@uwaterloo.ca).

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo. Should you have comments or concerns can be addressed to Dr. Maureen Nummelin in the Office of Research Ethics at 1-519-888-4567, Ext. 36005 or [maureen.nummelin@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:maureen.nummelin@uwaterloo.ca).

### **What feedback will you receive about our group session or the research?**

At the end of our group discussion, I will invite you to add anything else you wish to share with the group or privately (with me afterwards). I welcome your feedback through email, regular mail, or by telephone ([mminello@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:mminello@uwaterloo.ca), my office telephone 1-800-208-3826, or University of Waterloo, Department of Recreation & Leisure Studies, attention: Karla Minello, 200 University Avenue West, Waterloo Ontario, N2L 3G1; or through my advisor Dr. Sherry Dupuis, [sldupuis@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:sldupuis@uwaterloo.ca), 519-888-4567 extension 36188, also at the same address). Down the road, I will share a summary of our focus group discussion with you.

**Thank you in advance for your interest in this project!**

## Appendix C: Consent of Participation Form

### *The meaning, experience, and place of play in the lives of older women*

#### Consent of Participant

By signing this consent form, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator(s) or involved institution(s) from their legal and professional responsibilities.

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I have read the information presented in the information sheet about a study being conducted by Karla Minello of the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted. I am aware that the group discussion will be audio recorded to ensure an accurate recording of the participants' perspectives. I have been told that I can share as much or as little information as I feel comfortable. Excerpts from the group discussion may be included in a report with the understanding that all quotations used will be anonymous and only artistic reflections created during the focus group from those who provide consent will be used in reports and presentations about this research. I am aware that I may withdraw from the study without penalty at any time by advising Karla Minello or Karla's supervisor, Dr. Sherry Dupuis.

This project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo. I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns resulting from my participation in this study, I may contact the Director, Office of Research Ethics, Maureen Nummelin at 519-888-4567 ext. 36005.

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

YES                       NO

I agree to the use of my artwork created during the focus group or images of the artwork in written and oral reports and communications related to this project for research and educational purposes.

YES                       NO

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations from the focus group in written and other presentations associated with the research.

YES                       NO

I agree to audio recording of the focus group.

YES                       NO

Participant Name: (Please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D: Background Survey

*This short personal profile will provide me with a background of the volunteers in the study. The answers will be combined, not viewed individually. Please respond to the questions you feel comfortable answering.*

What age are you?

Are you:

- Married/Partnered
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Never Married/Never Partnered

Do you have any children?       Yes     No

Do you have any grandchildren?     Yes     No

How would you describe your race/ethnicity?

What level of formal education did you complete?

Please describe the type of work have been involved in. In addition to the care and work you do/did inside your home, what other kind of work did/do you do outside your home? For instance, paid work, volunteer work, full time, part time, on and off as you raised your children, etc.

How would you describe your overall well-being?



### Appendix E: Summary of Participants' Background Survey

	n	%
Total Focus Group Participants	19	100
Completed survey	17	89.5
Age		
60-64	1	7.1
65-69	2	14.3
70-74	3	21.4
75-79	4	28.6
80-84	2	14.3
85-89	1	7.1
90-94	0	0
95+	1	7.1
Not answered	3	
Marital status		
Married/Partnered	8	47.1
Widowed	8	47.1
Divorced	1	6.9
Never married/never partnered	0	0
Children		
Yes	16	94.1
No	1	6.9
Grandchildren		
Yes	14	87.5
no	2	12.5
Race and ethnicity		
Canadian	5	29.4
Caucasian	4	23.5
Canadian / European	3	17.6
Canadian / Caribbean	2	11.8
British	2	11.8
Not answered	1	5.9
Formal Education		

Less than high school	0	0
Some high school	3	17.6
High school	6	35.3
Some post secondary	1	5.9
University, bachelor's	3	17.6
University, graduate	2	12.1
Unclear	1	5.9
Not answered	0	0
Type of Work		
Full-time cared for own children, in home	0	
Full-time employed outside home, after children were older	2	
Full-time, outside of home	11	
Part-time, outside of home	1	
volunteer	10	
Well-being		
Excellent/great	3	20.0
Very comfortable mentally and physically	1	6.7
Optimistic, positive	1	6.7
good	6	40.0
Reasonably happy	1	6.7
healthy	1	6.7
Fairly active	1	6.7
Mental health issues	1	6.7
poor	0	0
Not answered	2	13.3

## Appendix F: Focus Group Agenda

### The meaning, experience, and place of play and playfulness in the day-to-day lives of older women

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#### Agenda

<b>Introductions</b>	30 – 40 minutes
About the project (10 minutes)	
Creating a safe space (10 minutes)	
Getting to know each other (10 minutes)	
<b>Arts-based Play Reflection</b> (see Handout #1)	<b>20 – 30 minutes</b>
<b>Break</b>	10 minutes
<b>“Show &amp; Tell”</b> (see Handout #2)	45 – 60 minutes
<b>Open Conversation about Play</b> (see Handout #3)	45 – 60 minutes
<b>Feedback on Your Experience Today</b>	15 – 20 minutes
Complete feedback sheet (5 minutes)	
Discuss feedback as a group (10 minutes)	
<b>Final Thoughts</b>	10 – 15 minutes
Anything else before we end our discussion today?	
Next steps	
– My summary	
– Your feedback later	

THANK YOU!!

## Appendix G

### Handout #1: Play & Playfulness Reflection (20 minutes)

1. **Think** about a recent experience you would describe as play or when you were playful in your everyday life. As you think about this experience, reflect on the following:

- What is happening?
- Where are you?
- Who are you with?
- How do you feel?
- How is time experienced?
- How is the space experienced?

2. **Create** a visual or narrative representation of this play experience or what play means to you. You can create:

- A collage
- A picture
- A painting
- A sculpture
- A doodling
- A poem, a story, or word art
- Or whatever you like

You can create anything at all—the theme is play or playfulness in your everyday life. The rendering might represent what play means to you, or it might be about how you feel when you're at play or being playful.

What I am most interested in is your artistic reflection of play and playfulness in your life, not your artistic sensibility or ability!

3. Please note I will invite you to **share** your representations with the others in our group.

## Appendix H

### Handout #2: “Show and Tell” – Sharing our Reflections of Play (45 – 60 minutes)

#### 1. **Share your artistic reflection with the larger group.**

What is depicted in your art?

What does play/playfulness mean to you?

How do you experience play or being playful?

#### 2. **Explore what the reflective/play activity was like for you.**

How were you feeling when you were creating the art?

Was this activity play for you, or not play? How so?

How did it feel to express yourself in this way?

How did you experience time during the activity?

How did you experience your surroundings, the room, the material available, the group?

#### 3. **Identify similarities/differences and themes among the groups’ reflections.**

What themes or commonalities do you see across our groups’ reflections?

What differences are there?

What do they tell us about common meanings of play and playfulness in everyday life?

What is the difference, if any, between play and playfulness for you?

## Appendix I

### Handout #3: Open Conversation about Play and Playfulness (45-60 minutes)

**Explore our meanings, experiences, and the place or role of play and playfulness, as older women, in our everyday lives.**

What place or role does play and playfulness have in your life?

What might your reflections and meaning of play say about you as a woman?

How does being a woman affect your play and ability to play or be playful?

What might your reflections and meanings of play say about you as you age?

How has your play changed over the years?

How does being an older or ageing woman affect your ability to play or be playful?

What role might play have in challenging or reinforcing stereotypes of women/older women?

What challenges or obstacles prevent or limit your ability to play and play the way you would like to play?

What type of things support you in being able to play the way you would like to in your everyday life?

What else would you like to tell me about play or playfulness in your everyday life?

## Appendix J: Arts Activity Observations Guide

What is my overall sense of the activity?

### *Specific reflections.*

Adapting the lifeworld existentials, how does the art-based play activity seem to be experienced?

### *Body.*

What impressions do I have of the women's physical beings during the discussions and arts-based activity? Relaxed? Uncomfortable? Tense? Animated? Reserved? Having fun? Serious? Engaged? Engrossed? How did this change as the activity progressed? What differences were there between the women?

### *Space.*

How did the room or space feel? Comfortable? Cold? How did the space seem to be experienced? Relaxed? Natural? Contrived? What impact did the space have on the activity? How did the women use the space? How accessible were the supplies?

### *Time.*

How did it seem for the women to get started, easy, difficult? What sense of time do the women seem to experience? How engaged are the women in their creations? How did the activity end—did the women seem to want to continue working on their creations or was there a natural ending?

### *Relational.*

What was the atmosphere like? How did the women seem to get along? How did the women relate to each other? How supportive of each other were the women in doing their art? How helpful were the women to each other? How did the women interact during the activity? What were the group dynamics like? What roles were taken (e.g., leader, helper, teacher, student)? How was power reflected in the group? How did that change over the discussion?

**Appendix K: Summary of My Observations during Arts Activity**

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
# participants	5	3	8	3
Overall impression	Relaxed and involved.	Engaged, intelligent, and friendly	Crazy, good!	Quiet
Lifeworld Existentials				
Body	Easy	Open, relaxed, people moving	Lots of movement, people very independent, yet together and helpful	Very much in their own, individual space.
Space	relaxed	Comfortable relaxed	Cacophony! Lively, noisy	At first a little uncomfortable. Quiet, quiet
Time	Time went quickly, women would have liked more time (I cut it off at 45 minutes.)	Slow getting started, but once we talked more about play, and the activity the women were engrossed in the activity, and didn't want it to end!	Time flew by!	Two women got right to work. One woman was not sure what to do. She talked to me, answered the questions on the handout and then began her rendering.
Relational	Relaxed and open. Faces are familiar to each other, but the women don't know each other by name.	Very supportive of each other, chatty, two women were friends and one of these was particularly interested in getting to know the other woman. Very warm, joyous.	A friendly bunch, lots of laughter, chatting. Two women did not do the art, yet, they were totally comfortable. One chatted with her neighbours and the other looked through the cookbooks I brought (she told me she loves to cook and try new recipes).	These women seemed to be in their own world, not really relating to each other. It was quite a contrast to the other groups.



**Appendix L: Feedback Form**

The meaning, experience, and place of play and playfulness in the lives of older women

Karla Minello

*Thank you very much for your participation today in our group's discussion about the experience, meaning, and place of play and playfulness in your life.*

What was this experience like for you?

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What worked?

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What did not work for you?

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What, if anything, has changed for you?

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How might we use this information to challenge the ways older women are understood in society?

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What suggestions do you have for me?

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Please share any other thoughts you might have.

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If you prefer, please contact me with your feedback through an email ([mminello@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:mminello@uwaterloo.ca)) or phone call (please provide your number and a convenient time for follow up) later.

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If you have any feedback you would prefer to give directly to my supervisor, please email ([sldupuis@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:sldupuis@uwaterloo.ca)) or call Sherry Dupuis (519-888-4567, Ext. 36188).

Down the road, in about four months, I will provide you a written summary of our focus group discussion.

*I am grateful for your insight and time today, and I look forward to reflecting on our discussion and carrying out the rest of my research project. Thank you so much for your help!*

Karla Minello

[mminello@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:mminello@uwaterloo.ca)

## Appendix M: My Reflections in the Focus Group Moment

*While the women are completing their feedback forms, I will complete a reflection in the moment of the focus groups. This is one small part of my reflective process that I am using throughout this research project.*

What was this experience like for me?

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What did I like best about today's session?

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What would I do differently in the future?

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What, if anything, has changed for me because of my participation in today's session?

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How might I use this information to challenge the ways older women are understood in society?

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Other thoughts or reflections.

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## Appendix N: Recruitment Materials

Recruitment Poster

**WATERLOO** | **APPLIED HEALTH SCIENCES**  
**RECREATION AND LEISURE STUDIES**

### **PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH ON**

*The Meaning, Experience and Place  
of Play and Playfulness  
in the Day-to-Day Lives  
of Older Women*

We are looking for women, 60 years & over.

You will be asked to participate in a focus group of approximately 3 to 4 hours in length.

Participation is voluntary, but you will receive  
payment for transit or parking.

Focus groups to be conducted at the University of Waterloo.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study,  
please contact:

*Karla Minello*

*Department of Recreation & Leisure Studies*

1-800-208-3826

Email: [mminello@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:mminello@uwaterloo.ca)

**This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance  
through, the Office of Research Ethics, University of Waterloo.**

## Email recruitment

Hello,

I am sending this email about research on women and play on behalf of Karla Minello, a master's student in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo. Karla is looking for volunteers, women 60 years and older to participate in focus groups about the meaning, experience, and place of play and playfulness in the day-to-day lives of older women. Information about her study is provided below. Please feel free to contact Karla directly if you are interested in participating in the study or would like more information.

Alternatively, I can pass along your personal information to Karla.

Please indicate that you agree that I, (name of potential participant) agree that Supervisor, Leisure Programs – Senior Services may give Karla Minello, of the University of Waterloo, my email address and/or phone number for the purpose of contacting me about her research on play and playfulness in the day-to-day lives of older women.

Name:

Email address:

Phone number:

Supervisor, Leisure Programs – Senior Services

Supervisor, Leisure Programs - Senior Services  
City of Waterloo

Note from Karla

My name is Karla Minello and I am a Masters student in the Department of Recreation & Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Sherry Dupuis on play and playfulness in the day-to-day lives of older women. As part of my thesis research, I am conducting focus groups with women to discover their perspectives on the meaning and experience of play and playfulness and its place in their day-to-day lives.

Participation in this study involves coming to the University of Waterloo and talking with a group of women and me about play and playfulness in your day-to-day life. You will be asked to participate in a group discussion with me and other women that should last approximately three to four hours in length. During the session you will be asked to participate in a creative arts play activity—perhaps you might create a collage, draw a picture, write a poem, do a doodling, write a reflection, a poem, a story, an anagram—you can create anything at all that reflects how you think about play in your own life! The theme of the rendering will be the meaning and experience of play and playfulness in your day-to-day life.

Participation in this study would take approximately 3 to 4 hours of your time. Participation is voluntary, but I will pay for your transit or parking fees. A more detailed information sheet about

my study is attached. Please be assured that the study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the University of Waterloo, Office of Research Ethics.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at [mminello@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:mminello@uwaterloo.ca) or 1-800-208-3826, so that I can arrange specific details (date, time, exact location).

Sincerely,

Karla Minello

## Recruitment Telephone Script

P = Potential Participant; I = Interviewer (Karla Minello)

I - May I please speak to [name of potential participant]?

P - Hello, [name of potential participant] speaking. How may I help you?

I - My name is Karla Minello and I am a Masters student in the Department of Recreation & Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Sherry Dupuis on play and playfulness in the day-to-day lives of older women. As part of my thesis research, I am conducting focus groups with women to discover their perspectives on the meaning and experience of play and its place in their day-to-day lives. I am looking to talk with women aged 60 and over. Would this describe you?

P - yes

I - Is this a convenient time to give you further information about the focus groups?

P - No, could you call back later (agree on a more convenient time to call person back).

OR

P - Yes, could you provide me with some more information regarding the focus groups?

I - Background Information:

- The group is expected to last 3 to 4 hours.
- Involvement is voluntary.
- There are no known or anticipated risks to participation in this study.
- In addition to a group discussion, during the session you will be asked to participate in a creative arts play activity—perhaps you might create a collage, draw a picture, write a poem, do a doodling, write a reflection, a poem, a story, an anagram.
- The questions will be quite general for example, what does play mean to you? How are you playful in your everyday life?
- You may decline to answer any of the questions that you do not wish to answer and may terminate your involvement in the focus group at any time.
- With your permission, the focus group will be tape-recorded to facilitate collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis.
- All information you provide will be considered confidential.
- The data collected will be kept in a secure location and disposed of in 3 years time.

- I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo.
- After all of the data have been analyzed, I will send you a summary of the research results for your feedback.

I - What else would you like to know about the focus groups?

With your permission, I would like to email/mail/fax you an information letter which has all of these details along with contact names and numbers on it to help assist you in making a decision about your participation in this study.

P - No thank you.

OR

P - Sure (get contact information from potential participant i.e., email, mailing address/fax number).

I - Thank you very much for your time. May I call you in 2 or 3 days to see if you are interested in participating in the focus group? Once again, if you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to contact me at 1-800-208-3826 or [mminello@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:mminello@uwaterloo.ca).

P - Good-bye.

I - Good-bye.



Email to Women who Agree to Participate in the Focus Group

Dear (Participant's name),

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my focus group about the meaning, experience, and place of play and playfulness in the day-to-day lives of older women. The details about where and when the focus group will be held are outlined below.

Date: mm/dd/yr

Time:

Place: room (LHN or BMH), at the University of Waterloo

Lyle Hallman Institute for Health Promotion/B.C. Matthews Hall is at the north end of the University of Waterloo campus. Please enter the campus from Columbia St. W., turning south on Hagey Boulevard. Turn right (west) onto Ring Road. Please turn left into the first driveway into parking lot M; this is the visitor's parking lot right outside the building where the focus group will be held. The parking rate is \$6 for the day. Coins are required (I will reimburse you when you come into the room).

B. C. Matthews Hall (BMH) is the building right behind the parking meter. The room is.....

You do not need to bring anything to the focus group. If you have any further questions about the focus group, please feel free to contact me.

I look forward to meeting you on (date), and thank you in advance for your participation!

Karla

## Appendix O: Thank you letter to participants

University of Waterloo

Date

Dear (*Insert Name of Participant*),

I would like to thank you for your participation in my study entitled “The meaning, experience, and place of play and playfulness in the day-to-day lives of older women.” I appreciate your time and insight. I hope the information gathered during our group sessions will contribute to our understanding of play and playfulness as we age, and shine a light on how play might help us age well.

Please be assured that any data pertaining to you as an individual participant will be kept confidential. Once all the data are collected and analyzed for my project, I will send you a draft summary that will form part of my thesis on the meaning, experience, and place of play and playfulness in the day-to-day lives of older women. I anticipate sending you this information by [insert date]. Upon completion of my research, I plan on sharing this information with the research community through seminars, conferences, presentations, my thesis, and journal articles.

In the meantime, if you have any questions about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor, Dr. Sherry Dupuis, at 1-519-888-4567, ext. 36188 or [sldupuis@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:sldupuis@uwaterloo.ca). As with all University of Waterloo projects involving human participants, this project was reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo. Should you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Maureen Nummelin, the Director, Office of Research Ethics, at 1-519-888-4567, Ext. 36005 or [maureen.nummelin@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:maureen.nummelin@uwaterloo.ca).

Thank you!

Karla Minello

University of Waterloo  
Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies

1-800-208-3826

[mminello@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:mminello@uwaterloo.ca)

## Appendix P: Feedback Letter

Dear (*Name*);

Please find enclosed a draft summary that will form part of my thesis on the meaning, experience, and place of play and playfulness in the day-to-day lives of older women. The summary describes the overall themes that were common for the women who participated in the focus groups as well as those themes that reflect differences in how the women think about or experience play and playfulness in their everyday lives.

I invite you to send me your feedback and comments on these themes. I would be interested in hearing from you about how well you feel I have captured the overall themes shared during the focus group you participated in, and any additional examples you have that might help inform the development of these themes further. Any feedback you provide will be integrated into my final thesis.

I welcome and look forward to your feedback, comments, and critique. You can send your feedback to me through email at [mminello@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:mminello@uwaterloo.ca) or by contacting me by telephone at 1-800-208-3826. Alternatively, you can send your comments by mail to me at the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo, 200 University Ave. West, Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1.

Please feel free to contact my supervisor, Dr. Sherry Dupuis (1-519-888-4567, ext. 36188, [sldupuis@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:sldupuis@uwaterloo.ca)) or Dr. Maureen Nummelin, the Director, Office of Research Ethics (1-519-888-4567, ext. 36005, [maureen.nummelin@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:maureen.nummelin@uwaterloo.ca)) if my draft summary raises any concerns. This project was reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo. Communicating and writing, as you know, is an interpretive act, but as a researcher, I strive to tie my interpretations rigorously to our focus group discussions.

Thank you once again for your time and insight!

Sincerely,

Karla Minello

MA Candidate

## Appendix Q: Letter to Women Participants and Summary of My Findings

Dear Women Who Participated in my Study about Play,

Thank you so very much, for your openness, insight, good humour, your stories, opinions, and time! I reveled in our discussions—meaningful and fun—an ideal blend of work and play!

My findings reflect a positive view of play. Many women reflected that play was important to them, as demonstrated by this exchange, (me: “Is play important to you?”), and Mary responded “Very important. Yes. ... It’s probably three quarters of my life.” Summing up her creative reflection about play, Victoria ruminated, “And I guess that’s it really. Um, I suppose that’s my life when you come to think about it. Yes.”

What follows is a brief summary of my research findings. It is peppered with your quotes, pseudonyms are used (I am happy to change names if you have a preference). I value your feedback and invite your comments about my findings—add to them or let me know if my interpretation does not quite “fit.” I included a few questions for your consideration. I look forward to your responses whether in our next discussion session or directly.

Please contact me in however it suits you—email, phone, mail, or in our next discussion session.

Email: [mminello@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:mminello@uwaterloo.ca)

Phone number: 1-800-208-3826

Address:

c/o Sherry Dupuis

Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies

University of Waterloo

200 University Ave. Wes

Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1

Lastly, my analysis has taken me far longer than I anticipated, so I thank you for your patience! I hope we meet again soon.

Many Thanks,

Karla Minello

MA Candidate, University of Waterloo

## *The wonderful, complex, and paradoxical nature of older women's play*

The purpose of my study was to explore the experience and meaning of play and playfulness to older women, and its place in their day-to-day lives. In discussion with groups of women, hearing their stories and sharing their artful reflections of play and upon my analysis and reflection, I find play to be a complex, multifaceted, and paradoxical phenomenon for older women. Indeed Sara did not experience play in her life at all, “never. I play at a young age.” Voicing a different perspective, Virginia said, “but playing is what keeps people going...If people stop playing, then they may as well be dead.” Struggling to reframe her play concept, Victoria wondered, “the word play for me suggests youth and lightness. ... But um, Do we skip? You know, I still find it difficult.”

### **A Feeling, a Being, and a Doing**

Overall, the women described play in three interconnected ways: as a feeling, a doing, and a being. Women may experience play in one or all of these ways—together or apart. In our discussions, I found that play did not have a singular meaning or experience to any one woman let alone everyone in all of the groups. Beneath the idea of play as a feeling, a being, and a doing were meanings and experiences of play that clustered around these seemingly paradoxical ideas:

- When at play, often time flies by, and yet during some play, time drags on
- Occasionally play is productive and sometimes play is unproductive
- Play can be social, and play can be solitary
- At times play is serious and at other times, play might be silly

### **Time flies by and time drags on**

There is a time-based aspect to play – time flies by and time passes more slowly. Play can be a time-filler, a way to stay busy, yet sometimes there is no time for play. Nancy shared her play concept, “I’m happy, relaxed. Time flies. It makes me feel alive.” Virginia experienced time in different ways depending on who she is playing, “with my granddaughter, time passes more slowly. ... I find that with this group, the time goes very fast.”

### **Productive and unproductive**

A paradox of play: women experience play as both unproductive and productive. Connie said, “play can just be sitting and having a coffee and a square or a muffin,” and Virginia responded, “we have to give ourselves permission to be idle and to regenerate.” The complexity of play’s value, particularly related to its productivity is exhibited in this exchange, precipitated by my question, “do you see play as a time waster?”

Victoria: Umm, no, not really, not genuine play. How important is play anyway?

Barbara: Very. I think.

Victoria: Yes ... as opposed to the things we need to do and should be doing. How do you balance these if you want to play all the time?

Rose seemed to reevaluate, “I didn’t realize that I played. I thought it was meaningful work. ... I should play more, I guess. ... I should lighten up.”

### **Social and solitary**

Play is a social experience, and play is a solitary experience. The women play alone and play with others—family, friends, and even strangers. Victoria commented, “Play, I think is

something that you can enjoy with yourself, you can enjoy with your friends, you actually feel a certain communion with yourself, with the people with whom you're doing it."

### **Serious and silly**

Play is serious, even stressful and can require effort. Play also brings fun, humour, and laughter. Play is uplifting and exuberant. The "quilters" described some of their play as requiring serious thought, practice, and effort. Charlotte commented, "Doing art is strange because yes, you are getting rid of your stress but you're also creating your own stress while you're trying to do it." Fun was associated with play for many of the women, as Barbara reflected about her play in her collage, "It's just movement and fun and joy."

### **Playfulness**

Conceptually, playfulness was closely linked to play and sometimes the words were used interchangeably. Playfulness was perceived as a state of mind, as Tess pondered, "Isn't there a mental quality in playful? An attitude?" Playfulness incorporates characteristics of fun, joy, spontaneity, and sometimes edgier traits like teasing and joking. As Victoria said, "Playful for me is umm, like teasing a bit. ... Playful can rather be mean in fact." Some women were playful and considered it an important aspect of their life, as Barbara said, "I see my playfulness as helping the marriage."

### **Well-being**

Well-being is of fundamental importance to the women and the ability to play was perceived to be challenged and enhanced by health. The women I interviewed were in good health (self-reported), yet there seemed to be a potential threat of health decline looming in the air. Play was perceived to be good for women's cognitive health and contributes to women's physical well-being. Sandra commented "it's for your health, you know, your mind." Nancy said, "When you play and you laugh. Laughing is the medicine for the body."

### **Society's Expectations for Women and Ageing**

At times, some women inhabit traditional roles (e.g., responsible for cleaning the house or cooking dinner) and have internalized and normalized society's expectations for their behaviour and responsibilities. Mary pondered, "I crochet. I have all these things I am *supposed* to be doing, because I am supposed to be a grandmother." Still others feel confined in the stereotype of an older woman, "so, it's easy to be silly with young people and strangers, I think, than sometimes your family, thinks that you're just Grandma and you should be doing serious stuff." (Virginia) Freedom from child raising responsibilities allowed some women to return to play. Some women relish caring for their grandchildren, and caring provides them with the opportunity to play. Being older liberated some, allowing them more time to play and permission to be and act the way they want.

### **Ageism and Discrimination**

Ageism and discrimination were experienced by many of the women. Many clearly articulated a desire to enact and see change in society. Older women are often misinterpreted "they view you differently" (Christine), crazy "losing our marbles" (Virginia) or ignored, "work harder at making yourself seen" (Virginia).

Ageism seeps into the day-to-day lives of the women in mundane interactions. Christine shook her head,

Because I went into a sports place. They sort of look at you like what are you doing here? I wanted a really good hiking shoe. I guess they figured I wanted a certain kind of shoe, like just a walking shoe. A regular walking shoe; whereas I needed a good hiking shoe. They didn't consider I'd be hiker because I was older sort of thing.

At times I sensed the women felt alienation, distance, and dehumanization in our youth oriented culture. Virginia said, "people tend to think ...we're losing our marbles, ... We're not as bright as we used to be, and so they don't think our answers, our opinions are useful maybe."

Still, my findings are not quite straightforward. Some of the women feel less invisible as they have gotten older and more empowered to speak out. Some of the women experienced their age in a way that gave them permission, an opportunity to have a voice. Connie explained, "It's like when we go to our investor, ... he talks to Jeff ... but I'm not afraid now to butt in and speak out... I think life has changed." Some women are ready and feel empowered to enact change, as Gloria said,

Gloria: wait, you know they say there is no age discrimination. I say bullshit, cuz there is.

Kelly: there is

Gloria: They look at us. We got the gray hair, the white hair. And we're just, you know. They don't look. ... okay, you've had your time.

Kelly: yeah

Gloria: You don't know anything. They know everything.

Kelly: yup

Gloria: we kind of sit back and go (*snort*) go, okay, whatever

Kelly: *ha ha*

Gloria: So, that's what I find, we have to *fight*.

### Reflective Questions

Does this summary reflect your meanings and experiences of play? If so, how so? If not, what is missing for you? What, if anything, would you like to add to my findings?

How might we use this information to make play more accessible to older women?

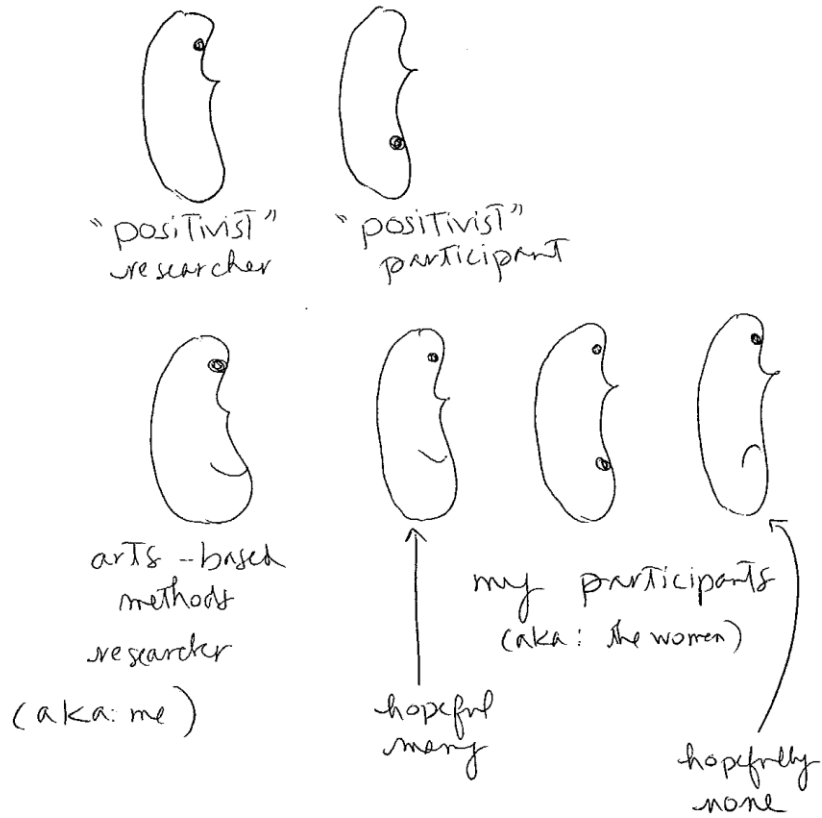
How might we use this information to challenge society's images and understandings of older women?

## Appendix R: Collage before Thesis Proposal Presentation





**Appendix S: Reflection about Research Participants and Me as Researcher**



## Appendix T: One page summary for Sherry

The purpose of my study was to explore the experience and meaning of play and playfulness to older women, and its place in their day-to-day lives. In discussion with groups of older women, hearing their stories and sharing their artful reflections of play in their lives and upon my own analysis and reflection, as well as with Sherry and others, I find play to be a complex, multifaceted, and paradoxical phenomenon for older women.\* It is no wonder one of the most common refrains in the play research is how difficult or elusive play is to define!

Playfulness and play are closely aligned and the women struggled to articulate how play and playfulness were different. Both were generally viewed as positive; although sometimes playfulness could have a negative aspect to it—perceived as teasing or a quality with a slightly mean edge.

As a phenomenological study of the lived experience of play, older women described their play experiences in three ways: as a feeling, a doing, and a being. Women may experience play in one of these ways or in each of these ways—at once or all at the same time. This construct of play was experienced within individuals and across the women as a group.

Underneath this overarching experience of play were meanings and experiences that clustered around these paradoxical ideas about play as:

- Social and solitary
- Serious and silly
- Productive and unproductive

Examining older women's play through the lens of a feminist gerontologist, I was sensitized to the challenges and opportunities that contextualized older women's play. Women's ability to play in the way that they would like are challenged and enhanced by health issues, and in particular, the potential threat of health issues. Society's expectations or normative roles that some women have internalized is an influence in how some women experience play. Ageism is a critical issue in the lives of many of these women, yet it did not seem to hamper most women's play.

(written October 29, 2013)

\* Indeed one woman did not experience “play” in her life at all and a couple others needed to reframe and redefine their concept of play to think about what play might be or could be in their lives.