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Opposite ends: widows' narratives of contemporary late life

BY PAULA VASARA*

Abstract

The life course perspective frames this study of contemporary late life. Thematic narrative analysis is employed to analyse the stories of 16 Finnish widows aged 79–89 years (Moving in Old Age: Transitions in Housing and Care research project) in order to explore the experiences related to growing old. The results indicate two kinds of narratives: nostalgic reminiscences about a happy past are typical of the *retiring to solitude* story, characterised by experiences of life nearing its end and of letting go; and those inclined towards the *keeping up* narrative are still seeking new experiences and playing active roles in everyday life. Both kinds of stories encompass well-being, in spite of their apparent differences in outcome. These results indicate that there is no single description of ageing well. Individual experiences of growing old are unique, and are interpreted within the frame of past experiences and understandings acquired over the life course. Therefore, leeway should be given for individual considerations regarding the particularities of life arrangements in advanced age.

Keywords: ageing well, everyday life, narratives, widows.

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Introduction

Finland is considered to be a part of the Nordic group of universalistic welfare countries (Esping-Andersen 1990) and is described to be one of the happiest nations in the world (Helliwell et al. 2019). According to previous studies, people in Finland, including older people, describe themselves as satisfied with their lives, and their subjective health as being at least rather good (Vaarama et al. 2014). Finns are also living in fairly good health for longer than before (Vaarama et al. 2014). In Finland, there is a growing population of more than a million people aged 65 years and over: life expectancy for women is approximately 82 years, and the overall number of 90-year olds is growing fast and expected to double in the next two decades (Official Statistics of Finland (OSF) 2018).

In spite of these positive statements, ageing is often associated with negative images in public discussions. Studies suggest that the age of 75 often marks a watershed, after which illnesses and functional disabilities become more prevalent (Fogelholm et al. 2013: 11). The last years of old age have become associated with inevitable decline, loss and illness (Meisner & Levy 2016). The more positive attributes once associated with old age, such as serenity, wisdom and dignity, have too often given way to images of old age as characterised by dependency and care needs (Bengtson & Settersten 2016; Laslett 1989; Tuomi 2001). Old age is not depicted as a pastoral idyll or an achievement, but rather, a gloomy image is painted in dark brushstrokes (cf. Kaufman 1986: 4–5), particularly regarding older people's care in Finland (Kehusmaa & Hammar 2019; Szebehely & Meagher 2017).

Widowhood and living alone in old age are also worth considering, as bereavement is one of the markers most often associated with negative impacts in life, and spousal bereavement has been associated with many long-term consequences, including loneliness (e.g. Soulsby & Bennett 2015). Losing a spouse inevitably changes one's everyday life, often rather drastically, and loss of companionship may be particularly difficult to compensate for. Women are especially affected by this: since women have longer life expectancy, are usually younger than their husbands and are less inclined to remarry, widowhood is commoner among older women than older men in western societies (Martin-Matthews 2011; Soulsby & Bennett 2015).

It is only by understanding the individual's lived experiences that a society enables, supports and finds ways to facilitate the possibilities to live and age in the manner the individual considers suitable and desirable. Thus, the purpose of this study is to take a closer look at contemporary late life from the perspective of older people themselves through their stories. More particularly, this study aims to canvass the kinds of narrative that are told about growing old in contemporary Finnish society, and to ask how older women portray their aspirations regarding ageing in this specific time and place. The life course perspective (Elder 1994) applied here connects personal stories to historical time and place, and emphasises the linkages among individual lives in time.

Narrative thematic analysis is employed to give voice to the experiences of a sample of older Finnish widows in their eighties. Their stories are individual narratives, but at the same time they portray what is shared in their lived experiences. The narratives are investigated to understand how the women navigate the turmoil of modern times and the contradictory demands placed upon them by society, which at its most extreme either requires older people's full participation or relegates them to the margins (Atchley 1989; Cumming & Henry 1961; Havighurst 1961). Thus, this article explores how these widows view their own everyday lives and the opportunities that lie within them. What comprises good ageing for them? How do they negotiate their own expectations, needs and preferences within the controversy around good ageing (Bengtson & Settersten 2016)?

The Life Course Perspective and the Storied Nature of Lives

The principles of Elder's (1994) life course perspective inform this study of older women's lives. Lives are viewed as ongoing processes that evolve in time and place. Each life course is individual, but it occurs in a certain time and place, which presents certain options as well as constraints on the pathways available. Over a life course there are a number of events, some of which are more meaningful than others, and the timing of these events, in addition to their occurrence, is significant. Moreover, because lives are interdependent, the effect of an event may spread widely across a web of linkages among individual lives, including across time periods and family

members. However, it is important to add that individuals are not merely cast into the world and drifting aimlessly through time. Even if individuals experience interlocking fates and are constrained by spatio-temporal frameworks, they do possess an ability to plan and make choices, that is, they have agency (Elder 1994).

Life courses situated in time and place set one frame but another is derived from the storied nature of our lives. According to Bruner (2004), we are surrounded by stories all our lives. Such stories can be understood as an ongoing and constitutive part of reality. Every individual is an accumulation of past events and experiences, and their varying interpretations, which are moulded into stories. These narrative constructions organise and frame the ways we interpret our experiences, life events and possibilities – they are a means to make sense of the world. In time, they accumulate into a stock of narratives from which individuals can draw to create new stories, which in turn are used as guides to interpret and reinterpret lived experiences (Bruner 1990, 2004; Riessman 2008). These story models also convey shared perceptions and models of ageing, and thus have an effect on what is considered possible, probable, expected or even accepted over the life course and in late life (Hänninen 2003; Hyvärinen 2010; Riessman 2008). They act as horizon against which expectations and experiences are evaluated, interpreted and valued (Jaus 1983; Koselleck 1985).

Analysing Narratives of Late Life

An analysis of narratives is employed to explore how older widows who live alone view their lives, and how they negotiate their needs and preferences into a functioning array of everyday practices. The interviews chosen for this study offer a view of the landscape surrounding older widows, aged 79–89 years, in the contemporary world. The analysis gives voice to the experience of growing old in Finnish society, and how expectations, needs and preferences are negotiated by the individuals chosen for this sample. It also aims to understand how the imageries that are embedded in our society adumbrate the possible and the expected.

Lives are unique, and it is not the purpose of this analysis to make overarching generalisations from the narratives chosen. Nor are these

narratives considered to be transparent windows into people's lives and lived experiences (Kaufman 1986; Riessman 1993). The stories are understood more as means to illustrate how widows organise and make sense of events and experiences, and how they make interpretations of events that take place in the present or the future. Each narrative is unique and is always tied to a certain time and place. Nonetheless, at the same time, they communicate something about the culturally shared, as each story is framed and shaped by broader historical and societal contexts that echo in the narrative constructions (Kaufman 1986: 25; Phoenix et al. 2010: 2-3).

Thematic analysis is applied to narratives that evolve in the interviews chosen for this study. The focus of the analysis is on the content of the telling – on what is told, not on how it is told. This kind of analysis is similar to content analysis in its focus on the content, but narrative enquiry differs in that the story is kept intact. Theorisations arise from the case, rather than from categories across cases. The account is not fractured into thematic categories, as it would be in content analysis, but is interpreted as a whole (Riessman 2008: 53-54).

The interviews are worked on one at a time, but as certain characteristics accumulate, it is possible to identify general patterns and to detect underlying assumptions. This kind of analysis results in selected cases that illustrate more general patterns and underlying assumptions, that is, the analysis is case-centred (Riessman 2008: 74-75). Even if the emphasis in thematic narrative analysis is not on the particularities concerning the interview situation, it is worth noting that a telling is always affected by situational factors and the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. Narratives are always intended for some audience, and this always plays a role in the content and form of the narrative (Riessman 2008: 57-61).

Interview Data

The data originated from the MOVAGE Moving in Old Age: Transitions in Housing and Care research project funded by the Academy of Finland (MOVAGE, 2011-2015). A total of 47 interviews were conducted in the winter of 2011-2012 in Central Finland. Everyday life, housing, moving decisions and care arrangements were discussed in the interviews with people aged 75 years or older. All interviews were recorded and transcribed,

and only some minor modifications were made, such as changing names to pseudonyms, and removing repetitions and expletives, in order to ensure anonymity and readability.

The interviews lasted for 79 minutes on average, and covered various issues regarding everyday life. They usually began with talk about the interviewee's experience of living in her current home, and then moved on to her previous life and housing history, and experiences regarding relocation. Family, social networks and leisure activities were also discussed. In addition, possible care needs and the use of various services were explored, and the interview ended with a question about their dream housing.

For the purpose of this study, a subsample of 16 older widows living in Central Finland was chosen from the larger dataset. Men, couples and women who were not living alone as widows were excluded. The purpose of the sampling was to choose women who, on paper, appeared to share similar key events and transitional phases over their life course, and who seemed to lead their lives under conditions shared by many of their contemporaries. Spousal bereavement is a very common life event among women aged above 75 years, and this is reflected in this data set. It is also an event that is often connected to ideas about transitions in social roles and life expectations, even if it is not necessarily regarded as a turning point in the life course.

In short, all these widows belonged to the same generation and shared similar life events and current life circumstances, such as being widowed, living alone and having some age-related problems with instrumental activities of daily living (IADL). The aim was to juxtapose these narratives of individual life courses with the familiar stereotypical images of older widows as a homogeneous group whose present lives and the futures are merely assigned to predetermined roles, preferences, aspirations and related reasonings (Meisner & Levy 2016).

All of these widows were born in the 1920s and 1930s, and they could be described as individuals belonging to the same *generation of reconstruction* (Roos 1987; see below). All had been married only once, and they described having marriages that had lasted for decades. In addition, all of them had children – three on average – but had also participated in work outside the family. Table 1 summarises some key characteristics of the sample.

Table 1. Some key characteristics of the narrators

Narrator	Born	Type of residence*	Years living alone	Number of children	Help and support**
Disengaged: retiring to solitude					
Henriikka	1925-1929	Age-related	10-	3	Inf+F
Inkeri	1920-1924	Ordinary	1-3	1	Inf+F
Karoliina	1925-1929	Ordinary	10-	6	Inf+F
Maria	1930-1934	Age-related	1-3	5	Inf+P
Sanni	1925-1929	Ordinary	10-	3	Inf+F
Sointu	1925-1929	Ordinary	10-	2	Inf+F
Vappu	1925-1929	Ordinary	4-10	3	Inf+P
Verna	1925-1929	Ordinary	10-	3	Inf+P
Engaged: keeping up					
Enni	1920-1924	Age-related	10-	4	F
Lea	1925-1929	Ordinary	4-10	3	Inf
Loviisa	1930-1934	Ordinary	4-10	2	Inf+F+P
Nelli	1930-1934	Ordinary	1-3	2	P
Senja	1930-1934	Ordinary	1-3	4	Inf
Sirkka	1930-1934	Age-related	4-10	4	P
Tuulikki	1925-1929	Ordinary	10-	4	F
Vieno	1930-1934	Ordinary	4-10	3	Inf

*Residence in age-related housing involves some special criteria, that is, age limits or functional disabilities.

**Inf= informal help: children, grandchildren, neighbours. F = formal services: home care, additional services such as transport, meals. P = private services: cleaning, transport, grocery deliveries etc.

In addition to their past life events, the sample's current life circumstances were also similar to a large extent: these widows were aged between 79 and 89 years and were living alone. At the time of the interview, all the widows chosen for this study had experienced bereavement; some had gone through only a year prior to the interview, but most of them had lived alone for about a decade or more. Illness and injury-related to

wartime experiences by some interviewees' husbands were a distinctive feature of the data, and may have resulted in slightly earlier bereavement due to untimely deaths related to wartime injuries. The majority of the women lived in ordinary homes, and received little or no formal help in their everyday lives. However, all had acquired some support due to difficulties in IADL – some only occasionally but some more intensely and from a combination of sources, including family and friends. All the interviewees described having long-term illnesses, but the degree and effect of managing everyday life varied significantly and did not correlate with the interviewees' chronological ages. The majority of interviewees described their health as good or satisfactory.

Situated in Time and Place: Older Women in Finland

Chronological age is often used to group older individuals, while *cohort* is a statistical term used to refer to a group of people born at the same time. It is often implied that older people form a homogeneous group: that they share the same preferences, needs and aspirations in later life, based on the fact that they share the same spatiotemporal and cultural context. To some extent, this claim is legitimate, since it is virtually impossible to step outside the social and cultural environment that shapes our interpretations, or to understand lived experience outside its context.

Mannheim (1952) defines a *generation* as a group of people of approximately the same age who shared a key experience in their youth, at roughly the age of 17–25 years. In this study, the concept of *generation* is better suited than that of *cohort* for the purpose of situating the widows' life stories in time and understanding the meaningful experiences that connect those stories. The aim is to outline some main features of the time and life events these older individuals have lived through. Thus, the concept of *generation* is used here descriptively to refer to a group of people who were born within a certain period, and who are connected by experiences related to time, place and the opportunities those environments presented (cf. Alestalo 2007; Mannheim 1952; Purhonen 2007; Roos 1987; Wass & Torsti 2011).

The usefulness of the concept of *generation* derives from its ability to sum up many of the key aspects and life events that may be considered

meaningful, cultural and shared experiences by a group of individuals born at the same time. However, the focal point of this study is not to generalise but to challenge generic stereotypical assumptions, and to illustrate the uniqueness of each individual's human condition despite their shared aspects. Each narrative constructed to interpret past, present and future experiences is based on individual experiences over the life course, and hence the outcomes, narratives and understandings are diverse.

A common typology concerning Finnish generations places women born in the 1920s and 1930s in the *generation of reconstruction* (Roos 1987). This term is related to Finnish history: Finland became independent in 1917 and took part in the Second World War. This war may be considered a watershed in the life course of people in this generation. They experienced scarcity in their youth, but a new time of prosperity dawned after the war years, and standards of living rose quickly.

Finnish society underwent rapid changes during the 20th century. Instead of people being tied to the land, it became more common for them to acquire some education and find employment in more urban areas. Marriage was important, and starting a family in one's own home was considered an achievement. Many women also worked, but their careers were more fragmentary most often due to multiple pregnancies and their staying home with the children. Even if life did consist of hard work, it was often described as a success story in many ways: there were vast improvements in young people's economic and educational levels, and a secure and stable lifestyle was achieved as a result of these societal changes (Markkola 1997; Roos 1987; Saarenheimo et al. 2014).

The shift from agrarian society to modern service society during the lifetime of people born in the 1920s and 1930s is also significant regarding individual lives. It means that individuals have become more distanced from the land, place and cyclical models, and hence from the idea of a single lifespan development. Gender and chronological age no longer define such clear roles or offer such predictability concerning the timing of life transitions and key events (Bowlby et al. 2010; Heikkinen & Tuomi 2001; Roos 1987: 48–49).

Now in their eighties in the 21st century, older people often live alone, many of them as widows. Previous studies have suggested that they are freer to reach beyond their immediate family and close surroundings,

and to pursue their own life goals (Haapola et al. 2013). With better financial resources and health, new opportunities to stay active open up, which in turn have an effect on the expectations, interpretations and demands set for individual lives. Longer life expectancy means that there are more peers of both sexes, and there are more generations alive at the same time (Karisto et al. 2013b: 41; Komp & Johansson 2015). This has an effect on social networks and everyday lives, as it offers opportunities for new kinds of reciprocity and encounters with kin and peers.

Findings: Narratives of Retiring and Keeping Up

The narratives of 16 widows chosen for this study shed light on what it is like to live as an old woman in contemporary Finnish society, and what a good everyday life comprises in these individual narratives. Surprisingly, there were two kinds of stories that dominated these older widows' narratives. They were not separate but rather located on a continuum of attachment regarding their lives. It was not a question of an either-or dichotomy, but more a matter of vocabulary and emphasis on certain types of shared interpretation assigned to events over the life course. The two narratives discernible in the stories told by these interviewees as *retiring to solitude* and *keeping up with the world*.

The interviewees' narratives about everyday practices and understandings concerning good ageing varied quite drastically. In spite of the differences, however, they did share some common characteristics. Some kept to the basic storyline more firmly than others, but with both storylines – *retiring to solitude* and *keeping up with the world* – they were able to keep the narratives intact. At the end, the same overall image of contentment and peace of mind was conveyed by both narratives.

Retiring to Solitude

The role reserved for an older widow in the *retiring to solitude* story type was that of a bystander. According to the lines of this plot, old age paved the way for gradually disengaging oneself from the hassles of everyday life. Eight narrators – Henriikka, Inkeri, Karoliina, Maria, Sanni, Sointu, Vappu and Verna – employed this storyline of voluntary withdrawal

from the fast-paced world. The *retiring to solitude* story type was characterised by key expressions such as *not anymore* and *not for long*. A vocabulary containing words such as *withdrawal*, *loss*, *acceptance*, *old*, *reminiscence*, *decline* and *end* commonly arose in these narratives. Their wishes were for peace, quiet and stability, with no hassles. The basic plot was nostalgic reminiscence: their past life had been full and happy, but now it was time to let go.

These narratives usually focused more on past experiences: for many, their past family life with a husband and children was formative for their later years. The fact that this period was already past was constructed as natural: there had been a transition into old age and widowhood since then, with the accompanying loss of roles. Marriage was looked upon with gentle nostalgia, and discord only rarely was referred to in passing. Children's successes in life were viewed as achievements of good parenting, and the years of shared nuclear family life as something that could be looked back upon with pride. Life appeared to have slowed down.

Karoliina's life had been very full: she had married rather young, and they had six children. She loved to be around children, and she worked with children all her adult life. In addition, she had been a young wife when she moved to her current apartment building, which had been full of young families, and very strong social ties were formed between women. She had been living in her family apartment of over 50 years and kept in touch with other women of her building, their health permitting. She remarked on the change in herself as follows:

Karoliina: You get like, that's what they say, those other grannies too, that there, well this, you would not want to go to any place any more. Is this then giving up on life, all this? That you have spent your life running around and doing stuff, and [...] and now it's quiet.

Life had slowed down for another informant, Maria, as well. She did not feel bored: her time was well spent reading and knitting, and she considered her slower life to be something of a natural progression. She was contented: she had lived most of her life in a house with only cold water and no central heating, and it was only a few years ago, after her husband had fallen terminally ill, that he had agreed to move into a more modern apartment. Now, Maria was enjoying her easy life.

Maria: Well, I don't have anything else, I have become so lazy, to go to any place, to go with the others, to the pensioners' meetings and activities, I have not been there once. Once, when I was still working, I was keen on going, and interested in things, but now I have become so idle.

The idea of already having done their share was a common line of thought among the interviewees who employed this *retiring to solitude* narrative. They did not describe themselves as having been cast aside, but they considered themselves entitled to step back from the busyness of the past. They valued easier everyday practices, and they were not willing to take on extra duties. Continuing regular contact with the children was presented as evidence of their happy family life together, but there was a clear distinction between this stage of life and the previous one: the years of family life and reciprocal care were mostly considered belonging to the past.

Karoliina, like other older widows, considered herself to have passed beyond the years of active parenting and grandparenting; the phase of minding the children and maintaining an active involvement in their lives was over. Even though her adult children acted as almost her sole social network, contact was kept at arm's length. Photographs of the grandchildren adorned the walls, and they were welcomed for occasional visits, but they were not overly encouraged, as Karoliina considered this to be too much hassle. In addition, some older widows saw it as their legitimate right to decline to attend family functions on account of their advanced age, particularly if any health issues were involved. For instance, Karoliina had made up her mind not to attend her granddaughter's wedding, regardless of her family members' pleas.

All in all, the social networks of these women were rather limited. Some, such as Karoliina, had good friends outside their immediate family, but many were more likely to have lost important peers, and these ties were never replaced. In part, this was due to the tragic fact that they had outlived most of their contemporaries, and no company of their own age for social activities was actually attainable. Moreover, a lack of initiative and interest appeared to accompany their everyday activities: what was considered absolutely necessary was taken care of, and everything else was 'extra' and left aside. This included even previously valued hobbies such as reading, knitting, attending theatre or a choir, and so on.

Some had age-related medical conditions such as cataracts or arthritis which hindered their activities, but lack of interest was described as the main reason for giving up these activities.

It is important to note, however, that the narratives most often described a specifically voluntary solitude. These narrators did not usually depict themselves as lonely. Although they did not deny the meaning of social networks, they considered their withdrawal a preferred lifestyle choice at this stage of life.

Vappu: I have all the company I need. And all in all, I don't need to, I enjoy my time alone. But that is because I had to keep up and smile during my years in working life, so now I know how to enjoy my solitude.

Vappu had worked for long hours, and she had been very active socially in her years as a hairdresser. It appeared that work, along with her husband, had constituted her social network. After retiring and losing her spouse, she felt that she had had enough. Now was the time to enjoy her right to spend her last remaining years in solitude.

Their past lives also appeared to justify a lack of interest in the home: only necessary maintenance was taken care of. Vappu, for example, had sold her family home to her son and moved into an apartment that her other children had furnished for her. Also, doing chores involved private negotiations over what was considered necessary. For example, Sointu, who lived in a very big house, stated: "Well, yes, if you just forgive yourself a little. But I don't even try to keep up with a perfect house anymore."

However, even if taking care of one's current dwelling did not have much appeal and often involved making compromises, relocation was only mentioned as a necessary evil, in cases where it might be impossible to avoid. One's relationship with the home was important, because the retrospective view of one's happy past was often physically located in the home. In that sense, preserving the family home was valued. In addition to these affectionate feelings, another reason not to move appeared to be more a question of not wanting to be bothered with it: their current home would suffice for the little time they had left. Living and housing arrangements focused on making everyday life as carefree as possible.

These narrators appeared to be comfortable talking about approaching death. Their own age and death were often referred to explicitly, sometimes even in pejorative terms. As ageing was understood as an inevitable loss, struggle was constructed as futile – which in turn sometimes led them to disregard caring for themselves, particularly through regular healthcare and exercise. Inkeri had sought home help, but she was advised to try to manage on her own for as long as she could in order to maintain her functional abilities. She did not quite see the point of this struggle.

Inkeri: One must, the doctor said that my back likes the exercise, and that I should try to do it. But then, I won't live for very long any more, I am going to be 89 next month.

The motivation for daily exercise appeared to be hard to find, particularly in difficult weather conditions during winter. It is worth noting that this may be related to the fact that these women from the older generation, like Inkeri, had not been accustomed to taking part in organised indoor sports activities such as going to a gym, but had preferred outdoor activities and functional exercise (Zacheus 2008). Nowadays, Inkeri attended a nearby day centre and participated in its activities, including physical ones, but she did so more for the companionship. Also, these widows' anticipation of decline, and of death catching up with them sooner rather than later, had resulted in unfortunate encounters with medical staff. In a medicalised society that is also facing financial challenges, older people's rehabilitation, and their possible refusal to have surgery in addition to regular healthcare, is a subject of debate (see, for instance, discussions from the viewpoint of critical gerontology).

However, it is worth noting that a lack of enthusiasm and vigour by no means equated with a depressive state of mind. On the contrary, almost all had come to terms with changes they considered a natural part of the life course, and they had adapted their everyday behaviour and activities accordingly, each in their unique way. Sanni described how she had been active previously and had participated in several outings with a pensioners' association, but now she could not even think of attending. She noted: "One is forced to adapt. There's nothing you can do." Once this stage of

acceptance had been reached, they felt contented as long as equilibrium was maintained. Once peace of mind had been achieved, life as a quest for experience was over for these narrators.

Keeping Up

At the opposite end of the continuum between attachment and withdrawal, there were eight widowed female informants – Enni, Lea, Loviisa, Nelli, Senja, Sirkka, Tuulikki and Vieno – with a firm grip on life. They refused to give in to the aches and pains of old age, and they saw themselves as the equals of anyone. Compared with the stories constructed by the older widows who utilised the *retiring to solitude* plot line, these women's narratives were strikingly different, even in the vocabulary they used: their narrations comprised words such as *still, not yet, if*. Their stories indicated present engagements, not merely remembered activities of the past. Even though they had had their ups and downs over the life course, they were by no means bowing out: there was still much to do, and many things to look forward to.

Common to all narrators, including those who employed the *retiring to solitude* storyline, was a feeling of contentment with their overall story. But these *keeping up* narrators in particular, even with their aches and pains, losses and struggles, shared a striving for the future and a desire to look forward in anticipation of new things. Their attitude towards life could be described as optimistic and welcoming. Enni was one of those sunny personalities that can light up a room. She had moved to an assisted living facility, which she considered a very lucky turn of events. Previously, she had lived in her fifth-floor family apartment – without an elevator, which had made things challenging with her walking frame. However, she joked about her reasons for moving, and claimed that the home care nurses had encouraged her to move only because they were too lazy to climb the stairs to reach her home.

Enni: I don't know what I have, I have all sorts of ailments. But it's okay, just as long as I can manage. And I'm really happy with my life.

Enni was nearing 90 years of age, and she chuckled that *this is quite a nice age*. She wondered somewhat mischievously whether she was *a bit of a fool*,

as she considered herself very happy with the way things were going on. With relocation she had found new friends, and she described how *life felt pretty good* at the time.

These narrators accommodated changes to housing arrangements in their stories. They considered moving to be a possibility, and some had taken action, relocating in their old age. Some retirees experienced moving as a necessary evil, but these narrators tended to focus on moving as means to gain something. For some, like Loviisa, supported living enabled them to continue to have an independent life. For others it may have been a lifestyle choice that enabled them to continue lifelong habits such as attending the theatre or going to the library without help. For some, it was a question of fulfilling a lifelong dream.

One of the discernible features of this narrative was that these women did not talk much about the end of life. Death was only referred to in passing, and with serene images of peace rather than relief from worldly sufferings. Nelli had recently lost her husband, and had fallen out with her stepchildren. In addition, she had become seriously ill. But as she sought for words to describe her circumstances, she did not opt for negative terms, despite her recent adversities; she chose to depict herself as *sad*, but not as having been *cast aside*.

Nelli: Seventy-nine years old, it is a lot of years. And sometimes you have to think that this is not forever, but for me, up until now, life has been kind of light all the way. And every day is a good day.

These types of positive references have recurred within these narratives, and these women, such as Enni and Nelli, tended to remark on their own great age with pride. They acknowledged changes in their lives, but they appeared to perceive no particular transition to the margins. The ability to adapt to changing circumstances and a more open attitude towards the future seemed to give them strength to carry on, despite their misfortunes.

This openness to possible futures did not translate into self-deception: an awareness of her increasing years was present in Senja's narrative as well, but she was still able to see potential in herself. One demonstration of this desire to continue living actively was the loud demand for rehabilitative services. Senja was a perfect example of

not giving into health issues: she had broken her leg very badly, but instead of giving up in her eighties, she demanded physical therapy, and she intended to dance the polka again. Her somewhat frugal nature also came into play in a delightful manner, as she spoke about not wasting things.

Senja: I told the doctor last winter, I said that I had bought a new pair of skis, skis and ski boots, modern ones, and I have to be able to ski again.

The narrators who were inclined towards the *keeping up* narrative tended to present themselves as more extrovert, and to describe wider social networks beyond their adult children and other kin in their narratives. They also depicted themselves as more engaged in various activities outside the home. For instance, Senja picked berries and sold them to her acquaintances for extra income, and took part in all sorts of associations, while Enni continued her membership of seven organisations. Nelli had made a career in banking, and now after her retirement she had plans to attend the University of the Third Age. She considered attending lectures, and she was looking forward to getting well again and being able to get around more. This also included making new friends in her new place of residence.

Nelli: I am really rather happy and satisfied with everything, considering that I am old and alone. [...] When I get this heart condition back in order, I am hoping that I can get around more.

However, there were also some narrators who had felt compelled to give up their social activities for health reasons. Even so, for example, Loviisa had been able to keep her spirits up most of the time, despite some disgruntled feelings associated with her condition and her confinement to her home. She had severe difficulty with walking, and she used a walking frame at all times, but her spirits were usually high.

Loviisa: Yes, it's nothing, even if you cannot or aren't able to stand, you can do things sitting down, because there is no rush, you just take your time. [...] There is no problem, if you don't try to hurry. And you can move so much with these [walking frames], and you really, really take your time, and take it easy, there is no problem, no other problem except that everything gets done more slowly.

The ability to bounce back in a resilient way appeared to be connected to their overall attitude towards life: they persevered because of their desire to find a way to make things happen, and their ability to negotiate their way around obstacles – if not in a literal sense then in a modified and acceptable manner at least.

Some, like Vieno, remarked how lucky they had been in their lives, with good health, a secured income and a nice home; but these women were also more likely to mention clear obstacles in their path. For instance, Tuulikki had been an active traveller around the world, but she had recently lost her eyesight almost completely. Still, she was able to look at the future and the past with contentment. She noted that *I have lived a colourful and good life, even if there were illnesses*, and at the time of the interview she praised herself for having had the courage to do things. The past was present, not forgotten or undervalued. But aside from the past, these women were taking a step towards the future. Their life stories were told as ongoing narratives of things already done and things still to come. Life was not over yet.

Discussion

There is something very human in making sense of the world by creating stories. Stories encompass the individual as well as the shared – our past, present and future experiences. Narratives guide us in our everyday lives, as they set the horizon of expectations against which we evaluate and interpret our own experiences and aspirations over the life course.

Each story is unique, but the narratives of the older women chosen for this study shed light on contemporary late life. In spite of sharing a cultural context, and even similar life events and transitions, the life stories of these Finnish women, and the attitudes towards ageing and life itself expressed in these narratives, were strikingly diverse. These stories paint very different landscapes for us to view, and they offer various standpoints from which we might choose to view our own ageing.

Those who leaned more on narratives of *retiring to solitude* had a darker tone, with more emphasis on loss and letting go, but they were by no means despairing. Even if the story was coming to an end, these narrators were able to highlight interesting twists and turns in their lives, and there were good memories to look back on. For these women, it was

time to bow out graciously, without regret. On the other hand, those more inclined towards the *keeping up* narrative were still peering around corners and unveiling possible routes. Some of them had chosen to continue on a familiar path, but there were others whose life stories were still in the making, still unfolding before the eyes of those whose lives brushed against theirs. For them, it was not yet time to head for the finale; it was time to move forward.

These narratives remind us of classical theories of ageing (Bengtson & Settersten 2016). The *retiring to solitude* narrative appears to reflect the image of ageing well according to the disengagement theory developed by Cumming and Henry (1961). According to this theory, ageing itself is the factor that causes inevitable withdrawal from interaction. Thus, the ageing process is considered successful when one disengages voluntarily from active life and is able to accept this disengagement gracefully. This appeared to be the case for some of these narrators. On the other hand, the *keeping up* narrative resembles more of Havighurst's (1961) activity theory, which focuses on active participation and views successful ageing as a continuation of activity levels established during earlier years. Traces of Atchley's (1989) continuity theory could also be seen in the stories of these older women in terms of the focus on adaptation to change and on consistency in lifestyle over the life course.

Changes in socio-economic factors are worth considering regarding these findings, and they might offer some explanation for the diversity observed. Studies indicate that, in general, life often appears to narrow down in later life (e.g. Karisto et al. 2013a). Social participation tends to decrease, even if one is in rather good health, has a good education and financial resources, and has access to all kinds of possibility (Karisto et al. 2013b). As for family ties, they seem to gain in significance, and they are commonly considered a great source of joy (Haapola et al. 2013; Karisto et al. 2013b).

One's experienced health might also play a role in narrations of late life. All the widows in this data set described having certain health issues, and almost all suffered from chronic disease. Nevertheless, the mere prevalence of illnesses and accompanying functional impairments was not sufficient to explain the differences in attitude towards life and ageing. However, it should be noted that those inclined to disengage were slightly older. Chronological age is a rather poor variable regarding experiences

of individual ageing, but it might tempt us to ponder whether there are some changes that are more likely to take place after a certain age. This line of thought recalls Laslett's (1989) famous distinction between the third and fourth ages, or Neugarten's (1974) insights into the categories of *young-old* and *old-old*, which have been considered as explanations for variations in old age. While it should be noted that these narrators were all above the age of 75 (compared with Neugarten's categories of 55–74 and 75+ years of age), this might be explained by rising life expectancies and advances in medicine which have altered the chronological limits on persons considered old in the first place. All in all, the available data demonstrate that there is vast variety but it does not explain why particular narrators should choose one narrative over the other.

Conclusion

It is not a matter of either-or. Life, and narratives of contemporary late life, cannot be categorised as black or white; it is more like a mix of colours. The value of this research is in showcasing the particular and the unique, and connecting them to the human condition that is shared by individuals living late life in the contemporary western world. What is valued in life is always worth debating, and the discussion should not be limited to the extremes. On the contrary, it should be acknowledged that there are multiple factors that weigh in, and a whole variety of routes from which to choose in search of a meaningful (late) life.

More research is certainly needed to understand the paths that lead to experiences of well-being and how to find these routes. It is important to understand the reasoning behind different attitudes and choices over the life course, and how various meanings are assigned. An appreciation of heterogeneity is a good starting point: it is important to understand that perhaps not all roads lead to Rome, but many do. Thus, the heterogeneity of life in its various forms should be valued and celebrated. Good practices are not easy to pinpoint, but we should strive to understand and distinguish the factors that may contribute to the possibility of living life to the fullest.

The overall impression of contentment with life that is embedded in these individual narratives of late life is comforting. It assures us that good outcomes are possible in a society that allows leeway for individuals

to age in a manner they experience as fitting. The findings of this study suggest that it is above all the ability to arrange one's way of living in a manner compatible with one's personal values and preferences that is the key to the experience of ageing well. An adequate home, necessary support and meaningful things to do are vital basic needs that cannot be set aside, but what counts as adequate, necessary and worth pursuing should be left to the discretion of the individual – as should the choice of whether to retire to solitude, or to plunge full speed ahead into the whirls of the world.

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