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Maria Alexandra d'Araújo, Margarida Alpuim, Catarina Rivero & Helena Águeda Marujo

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Narrative Practices and Positive Aging: A Reflection about Life Celebration in a Group of Old Women

MARIA ALEXANDRA D'ARAÚJO

*Social Policy Department, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Lisbon,
Lisbon, Portugal*

MARGARIDA ALPUIM

Fellow of the Society for Community Research and Action – APA's 27th Division

CATARINA RIVERO

*Portuguese Association of Studies and Interventions on Positive Psychology,
Lisbon, Portugal*

HELENA ÁGUEDA MARUJO

*Center for Administration and Public Policies, School of Social and Political Sciences,
University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal*

The main objective of this article is to address the impact of narrative practices in life celebration after the age of 80 and in the co-construction of a community-positive future. We share here an exploratory reflection about the narratives of a group of older women integrated in a community project. The Wednesday Tea Project (Chá das Quartas) has been ongoing for 4 years, and involves a group of old women experiencing high levels of loneliness and isolation in their small village in Portugal. The Wednesday Tea Project is based on positive psychology methodologies and consists of ritualized sessions that encourage participatory group dynamics. To describe how this project has highlighted the benefits of narrative practices, we utilized a series of scaffolding questions. Some of the most relevant outcomes of this project are: (a) the deconstruction of the dominant social discourse; (b) the publication of a book; (c) the reduction of loneliness feelings by re-remembering significant figures; and (d) new levels of action both to women and the community as a consequence of a

Address correspondence to Maria Alexandra d'Araújo, Av. General Norton de Matos, N°65, 2°Esq, 1495-148 Miraflores, Portugal. E-mail: maria.alexandra.daraujo@gmail.com

re-authoring process. Narrative practices seem to have contributed to the consolidation of all time dimensions, giving these women the opportunity to celebrate life after the age of 80, while also allowing the community to be part of and to benefit from the process. A reflection about the contributions of this article to a paradigm change toward positive aging is presented.

KEYWORDS *narrative practices, old women, positive psychology, positive women aging*

Once upon a time, in a faraway village, there was a group of very old women. They lived alone in their houses, and lots of them suffered from loneliness. In that village, these women seemed not to be seen by other inhabitants. Most of these women received a regular home visit from a volunteer of an organized Catholic group who spent some time talking with them. The volunteer would also check whether there was something else the women needed, beyond company and comfort. Until one day something happened. Both elders and visitors thought of a new way of being together: all the women gathered together in a weekly meeting. During those meetings women had the chance to write and talk about the best of their lives and their memories. Four years went by, new friendships and narratives emerged...

...time passed by and the new narratives of this group of old women now focuses on more positive aspects, such as life celebration, interpersonal relations, new friends, memories, gratitude, and dreams. Curiously, women seem to be more visible each day. Visible to those who had never noticed they were there all along. Since then, both community members and Women of the Wednesday Tea Project appreciate one another more and share new activities. And the village lives happy as never before.

Our objective for this article is to explore how the new narratives and relationships have influenced women's well-being and their plans for the future, as well as the community—other people living in the village, in particular those who interact directly with these women, such as their families, friends, neighbors, elements from social support systems (family doctor, home care, religious groups, among others), and other social, cultural and artistic partners. We will address the impact of narrative practices in a group of very old women and in the way they celebrate life after the age of 80.

We seek to share an exploratory reflection about the narratives that have emerged over the last 4 years in a community project with a group of very oldwomen. Since the beginning of the project, we have been collecting information to assess the impact of the project both in the group and in the community (d'Araújo, Alpuim, Rivero, & Marujo, 2015) and to identify the best practices that have been applied (d'Araújo, Alpuim, & Marujo, 2014). After spending some time looking at the

project from that particular angle, we felt the need to take a “kaleidoscopic” approach and went on a new tour around the data we had been collecting. Listening to the voices of those women again made us appreciate even more how narratives play an essential role in this project. So, we decided to (a) deeply reflect on the practices of the project; (b) explore the new narratives; and (c) examine how these have impacted this group of women and the community around them.

Aware that inquiry methods are central to narratives practices, we will guide our article through a series of scaffolding questions and statements. *“The problem is the problem,” aging is not the problem:* First, we will review a few aging approaches, in particular those that help us have a positive perspective on the subject. *In which way can positive psychology be useful?:* Then, we will present the principles of positive psychology and briefly describe some positive psychology areas of study and practices. *Welcome Narrative Therapies! Please introduce yourself; let us know who you are:* Next, we will talk about narrative therapy, narrative therapy techniques, and narrative practices and community work. *If you had to develop the landscape of action for this community project, how would you describe this group?:* Before starting our reflection, we will briefly characterize the group and the community project at issue. *What do Wednesday Tea Project’s activities mean for Narrative Practices?:* In this section, we will give details about specific characteristics and activities of the project, and we will make a connection between them and the narrative practices. We will also try to identify which benefits seem to have arisen from those practices. *Which metaphor would give meaning to the experience of those involved in this project?:* Finally, we will conclude by integrating and giving meaning to the experiences we described throughout the article.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

“The Problem is the Problem,” Aging is Not the Problem

Aging is not a problem: it starts at the conception of life and it ends with the person’s death. Aging is an individual, universal, and continuous process (Vaillant, 2003). At the same time, aging is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon. As a biopsychosocial being, one does not get old alone; the way someone experiences old age is also influenced by the context in which that person is living (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Fernández-Ballesteros, 2011; Vaillant, 2003).

Aging *per se* is not a problem, and it is not an indicator of demeaning decay or disease. When we refer to an old person that merely means we are talking about someone who has lived for many years, regardless their health condition. A great number of problems in old age are not a result

of aging processes; they are, in fact, a question of disease (Vaillant, 2003). Nevertheless, a negative approach to the connection between aging and decline or disease has been made for a long time in the geriatric literature (Fernández-Ballesteros, 2011; Gergen & Gergen, 2006; Marchand, 2005).

In the second half of the 20th century, some authors contributed to changing this paradigm, and new topics of interest in research emerged. Baltes and Baltes (1990), for example, introduced a new aging model, in which they conceptualize a dialectical competition between gains and losses—the Selection, Optimization, and Compensation (SOC) model. According to them, losses tend to surpass gains at a certain age; however, it is still possible to compensate for losses and enjoy a good quality of life in very old age. In addition, the new discipline of positive psychology took a new perspective on aging, and it has been promoting a more positive acceptance and integration of the aged in the communities in which they live (Gergen & Gergen, 2001; Gergen & Gergen, 2006).

Aging doesn't seem to be a problem in and of itself, and nowadays we can even talk about positive aging, meaning that it is possible “to grow old with grace” (Vaillant, 2003, p. 310).

WHAT ABOUT THE AGED? IS THE OLD PERSON A PROBLEM?

An old person is far from being a problem, as well. “Later life brings opportunities for transforming the experience of self, and the value of self, in the cycle of life” (Stirling, 2010, p. 4). An old person's life experience can be seen as community and intergenerational cultural heritage. The power of such experience not only brings personal meaning to life—more than material goods which were once particularly valued—but also enriches the foundational values that sustain the community (Stirling, 2010). Gergen and Gergen (2006) developed a positive approach to integrate psychological, individual, and relational aspects of aging—the Life Span Diamond—which considers positive mental states, physical well-being, relational resources, and engaging activities. These perspectives contribute to a new narrative and to a new paradigm in which the old person is “first and foremost a person who is living a part of the normal lifespan” (Stirling, 2010, p. 7). Moreover, during this process the aged can even develop their potential (Gergen & Gergen, 2006; Vaillant, 2003).

IF NEITHER AGING NOR BEING AN OLD PERSON IS A PROBLEM, IS AN OLD WOMAN A PROBLEM?

Being an old woman is not a problem, indeed. But it is far from being easy as well. “[T]he stereotype of the aging woman is the most negative of all age and gender groups” (Gergen & Gergen, 2006, p. 416). First of all, western

societies are extremely focused on aspects of beauty, and there is a strong preconception of what a woman should be—and how young she should look (Clarke, 2011). The standards of female beauty lead to the concept of the ever-young woman and are based on an ideal combination of features to which women can barely correspond: “young, thin, toned, healthy, white, suntanned body with flawless and wrinkle-free skin, perfectly coiffed hair, little or no body hair, artfully applied makeup, and the latest fashionable trappings” (Clarke, 2011, p. 1). However, as the process of aging occurs, physical changes are inevitable, and the old woman “is often portrayed as a marginalized figure—ugly, undesirable, and weak—in the late stages of physical and mental decline” (Gergen & Gergen, 2006, p. 416). By contrast, men’s processes of aging tend to be considered as a positive improvement (Clarke, 2011). Secondly, in western societies people also put a high value on productivity. So, if a person is retired that means she is not productive any more, she is useless, unable to make decisions or keep her daily routines (Gergen & Gergen, 2006). In the case of the old woman, the connection is made to menopause, with a focus on depression, dementia, decay, and other negative issues (Clarke, 2011; Gergen & Gergen, 2006). “Older women are subject to negative stereotyping and discriminatory behavior by virtue of their simultaneous membership in the categories of ‘old’ and ‘woman’ with the resultant combined impact of ageism and sexism” (Arber & Ginn, 1991a, cited in Clarke, 2011, p. 30).

We decided to explore two approaches that would help us give meaning to the experiences of the group of old women involved in the project: positive psychology and narrative therapy.

In Which Way Can Positive Psychology Be Useful?

Positive psychology “uses scientific methods to study people at their best¹” (Rivero & Marujo, 2011); in other words, it is the “study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups and institutions” (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104). This field of study officially emerged in 2000, when the two foundational authors—Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi—proposed a change of mindset and action, from a focus on deficits and pathologies to an emphasis on strengths and what is necessary to promote positive human functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

WHICH POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AREAS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE CELEBRATION OF LIFE IN VERY OLD AGE?

Here we will present some positive psychology areas of study that were considered in the creation of the group dynamics within the context of

the community project at issue, in order to facilitate the development of a constructive environment.

First, we acknowledge the benefits of *positive emotions* as a continuous phenomenon in people's lives. Positive emotions have an impact in helping people broaden horizons, make decisions, deal with challenges, and choose from a variety of strategies to face reality (Fredrickson, 2003). Second, we take into consideration the relevance of *positive relationships*. This type of reciprocal connection implies, among other aspects, nurturing trusting relationships, as well as empathy, intimacy, and mutual understanding (Ryff, 1995). Third, we need to be aware that experiencing *flow* allows people to deeply concentrate and focus on a task for which they have competence and ability, leading people to lose track of time and their problems (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Also, *spiritual rituals and moments* bring a sense of inner peace and help people frame pain and suffering at the same time that they give meaning to life (Vaillant, 2008). Next, sharing *positive memories* allows people to re-tell their life stories, creating an opportunity to co-construct a new reality. Drawing from the best moments of the past, people make present life richer and closer: "Sometimes old age is made bearable by forgetting the bad stuff. We all spend our lives reconstructing our biographies to make our present more harmonious" (Vaillant, 2003, p. 101–102). Another area of consideration is that of *gratitude*, which "can be conceived of as a vital civic virtue" (Emmons & Shelton, 2002, p. 463). According to Emmons (2009), we cannot be thankful to ourselves, and gratitude makes us think about others. Besides being a strong altruistic trigger, gratitude also invites people to communicate certain aspects of their lives "by examining the expression of positive emotions" (Toepfer & Walker, 2009, p. 182). Writing gratitude letters can be a powerful exercise, contributing to develop one's sense of well-being (Toepfer & Walker, 2009). Research suggests that writing gratitude letters to a divine entity, in particular, can stimulate strong personal insight, as well as give people a more positive and integrated meaning to life events (VandeCreek, Janus, Pennebaker, & Binau, 2002, cit. in Toepfer & Walker, 2009). Finally, *appreciative questioning* invites people to change from the first moment of an encounter with another. When posing a positive question we open doors to a new reality that immediately starts taking shape, and "the more positive the question we ask, the more long-lasting and successful the change effort" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 53).

Welcome Narrative Therapies! Please Introduce Yourself; Let Us Know Who You Are

Narrative therapy emerged within the context of family therapy in the 80's, with Michael White and David Epston's work (Payne, 2006; Tarragona, 2006; Wallis, Burns, & Capdevila, 2011). These authors suggested a new

paradigm to therapy, contrasting to traditional approaches. In narrative therapy, people are considered as experts of their own lives, and problems are seen as separate from people (Dulwich Centre Publications, cited in Wallis et al., 2011)—the person or community “is not the problem, the problem is the problem” (White & Epston, 1990). In the narrative process, language is crucial, since reality is said to be created by the words we use to refer to it (Tarragona, 2006), therefore influencing how we envision the world and how we take action over it (Russel & Carey, 2004).

Michael White prefers to use the term “poststructuralist” when talking about narrative therapies (Russel & Carey, 2004). Nevertheless, these are usually referred to as one of the postmodern types of therapy (Tarragona, 2006), in the sense that, for narrative therapists, reality is socially constructed, it assumes a collaborative approach and a focus on relations, and it is action-oriented (Gergen & Warhus, 2003).

There is a more specific point of view within the constructivist narrative tradition: feminist narrative therapy. Our work is not based on feminist principles such as defying power structures (Russell & Carey, 2004) or exploring meta-narratives about women being subject to injustice (Lee, 1997). However, we believe that a poststructural feminist perspective is still present in this article and in our work, to the extent that it questions dominant ways of describing the world, in particular gender relations and preconceptions.

Narrative therapy techniques go far beyond the scope of the individual clinical setting. Few academics have written about the specificities and contingencies of applying narrative principles to collective settings and to group therapy; and when they do, it is often associated with traumatic situations (Carrizo & Rasera, 2010; Ricks, Kitchens, Goodrich, & Hancock, 2014). Nevertheless, there are a lot of people applying narrative principles to community work, leading many authors to talk about narrative practices instead (Tarragona, 2006).

Several techniques are commonly used in narrative approaches. One of the most important aspects of narrative therapy is to highlight *unique outcomes* and to develop new story lines around them (Payne, 2006; Wallis et al., 2011; White, 2007). Unique outcomes are exceptions or untold parts of a story that allow us to get a more complete description of events, providing us with a new way to look to ourselves and to the physical and relational context in which we are living (White & Epston, 1990). This focus opens doors to alternative stories and, therefore, alternative attitudes through *re-authoring conversations*. Two landscapes are developed during the re-authoring process: the landscape of action—describing experiences and sequences of events—and the landscape of identity/consciousness—finding meaning and reflecting about those actions (Wallis et al., 2011; White, 2007). Both are fundamental to mapping the re-authoring conversation, as they allow us to extend our repertoire of life meaningful events, as well as

to stimulate new levels of action (White, 2005). Another relevant narrative practice is that of *re-membering conversations*: promoting an active recollection of memories in which we assign new meaning to some of the most significant relationships we have established throughout our lives (Payne, 2006; White, 2007). Through a re-membering process we can honor people who played a special role in our lives, downgrade otherwise inflated voices, or re-place figures from one affective position to another (White, 2005). Conversations and other forms of oral narratives are limited as far as describing reality. Many authors consider alternative ways for conveying and constructing one's stories and narratives. *Writing exercises*, such as letters, or reports or lists, can have powerful individual therapeutic results, as well as a strong community impact (Lee, 1997). According to Janet Lee (1997), some of the benefits of written narrative practices are: opening the possibility to collect and archive stories; disseminating new narratives beyond the limits of the group, giving others the opportunity to have access to them; and possibly inspiring future change and action.

Where Is the Meeting Point for Positive Psychology and Narrative Therapy?

Despite the fact that both approaches have distinct epistemological bases—narrative therapy came from a constructivist and poststructuralist tradition, and positive psychology is built on a positivist foundation (Tarragona, 2013)—there are several communalities in them: (a) both seek what works, try to find out the best in people, and share hope in human possibilities; (b) both question the emphasis that traditional psychology gives to deficit and pathology; (c) both share a future-oriented approach; and (d) both have a focus on personal agency, considering that individuals have multiple competencies, therefore being able to have impact in their context (Tarragona, 2013).

PROJECT DESIGN

If You Had to Develop the Landscape of Action for this Community Project, How Would You Describe this Group?

The Wednesday Tea Project (*Chá das Quartas*, in Portuguese) consists of a group of more than 40 independent old women, most of them over 80 years old, living in a small village in the southern interior of Portugal—Vila Viçosa. These women used to be described as experiencing high levels of loneliness and having few moments of interaction with the community. Four years ago they decided to join the Wednesday Tea Project: a weekly gathering, every Wednesday, in which a tea is served at the end. This project is based on positive psychology methodologies and it consists of 2-hour ritualized

sessions, where participatory group dynamics take place, e.g., guided exercises, practical activities (embroidery, sewing, handcrafting, among others), free dialogue, praying, and tea time. Some of the most relevant operational features of the project for this article are: women not having to pay to participate in the activities; participation not being mandatory; and the fact that there is no record of attendance.

NARRATIVE PRACTICES IN THE WEDNESDAY TEA PROJECT

What Do Wednesday Tea Project's Activities Mean for Narrative Practices?

This project has highlighted the benefits of narrative practices, to the extent that these practices have played the role of facilitators in the process of positive aging within this group of old women.

In this section, we describe the specificities of the project and the narrative practices that we associate with them. We also analyze how these may have positively contributed to the development of these women and their community. We illustrate our analysis with excerpts of conversations, interviews, and other testimonies that women have been giving on different occasions, throughout the project.

We organize this section in separate sets of activities, narrative practices, and benefits: first, we talk about women-only gatherings; second, we comment on the recollection of positive memories associated with the publication of a book; after that, we examine women's narratives in gratitude letters; and finally, we explore how women respond to questioning during informal conversations and structured exercises. The relationships between each one of these sets of activities, practices, and benefits are not linear: certain activities may be associated with various narrative practices, and certain benefits may result from a combination of different activities. Even though we present them in a systematized order, we would like to emphasize that they all are interconnected.

Does It Make Sense to Have a Women-Only Group?

Yes, it is absolutely imperative to demystify initiatives like the one presented in this article. As we said before, men and women have different processes of getting old, and there are very strong and deeply rooted stereotypes about women's aging which need to be considered when developing an intervention of this nature. We believe that the Wednesday Tea Project group should be unapologetically female-oriented. The fact that participants have a great number of aspects in common besides gender, e.g., age, birthplace, lifestyle, culture, among others, contributes to this encounter being a facilitator of deep and rich moments for sharing life experiences and memories.

These women seem to know what each other means and thinks when they talk about their past and present reality. At the same time, there is a climate of mutual confidence and complicity. Being an old women-only group allows participants to deconstruct the dominant social discourse.

These women were raised in a social context and in particular circumstances that might not be understood or appreciated by younger generations, or even by men of their own age. It seems like no one has ever asked these women to give their opinion, as if in society there was neither space nor desire to accommodate their points of view. Freely and openly talking, writing, and thinking about a variety of issues allows women to develop, share, and thicken their own social discourse. Now they feel that their voice, their perception of life, and how they deal with daily situations is respected and valued not only within the group, but also in the larger community.

This project brings to light these women's stories and activities, therefore supporting the need to rethink our models and images of female aging. After all, it seems that it is possible to grow old and still be highly productive and intellectually active: "As soon as I go out to my backyard, I feel like I'm a new person." [What do you enjoy doing there?] "Everything, from reaping to digging holes, planting seeds, harvesting" (woman, 75 years old). "My head is working fine, thank God. I know where my things are, I know I have money in my wallet; when I go to the store, I know exactly how much money I have" (woman, 84 years old).

The possibility of having such powerful conversations in a comforting environment provides women with an opportunity for the development of an "inner-empowerment" feeling, and to share and develop their own narratives. This project seems to help strengthen the expansion of a new aging paradigm.

Would You Ever Say These Women Are Capable of Publishing a Local Bestseller?

In this project, one of the most incredible outcomes is the publication of a book by the group of women who participate in the activities. Right after the project began in 2010, the women who voluntarily gave support to the group started realizing that much invaluable knowledge and many traditions were being brought together by gathering all these women in the same room. Three years later, a book by the Wednesday Tea project was published: *To Plough the Time*, so titled as a metaphor for preparing and nurturing the present moment so that the relationships we establish are well-rooted and the future is fruitful.

Besides the book itself being a great outcome of this project, the process of working on it was also extremely constructive. At the beginning, a few activities were put in place to help women recollect their precious positive

memories. Women were asked to write down, by hand, stories, proverbs, prayers, poems, recipes, and other cultural customs and traditions that they remembered and they would like to share.² When the book was being edited, an important choice was made: women of the project created drawings to embellish their contributions, and these were used as a key graphic element of the book. This decision was made to reinforce the need to look at these women's creations as they had originally been assembled, giving the reader the opportunity to get as close as possible to these women's reality.

This exercise was a great opportunity for women to restore and reactivate their talents, such as writing skills, cooking knowledge, and so on. This book confirms the relevance of the unleashed narratives, by perpetuating a legacy that would be otherwise lost forever. Besides the cultural value of the book, it is interesting to witness how the community mindset changed, by now commending these women's wisdom, which was once considered outdated and uninteresting. Finally, the book was launched in an official community ceremony at the City Hall's official room, chaired by the Mayor, in the presence of the group of women. The public recognition and the unique life experience for the group were the final elements to complete the cycle of transformation triggered by a single and simple practice: truly looking and listening to those who share the present moment with us, either young or old, male or female.

Most of what was said in respect to the process of creating the book is equally true for other smaller individual written exercises. A few examples of this type of work at the Wednesday Tea Project are goodbye letters, birthday cards, and gratitude letters.

Do Gratitude Letters Enrich People's Lives?

Since the beginning of this project, women have been writing gratitude letters. This exercise happens once a year, during the month of May, traditionally dedicated to Our Lady. This group of old women is invited to write their gratitude letters to Our Lady of the Conception for several reasons. First, the image of Our Lady of the Conception was crowned as forever Queen of Portugal in 1646 by King John IV of Portugal. This image is exhibited at the National Sanctuary of Our Lady of the Conception in the Castle of Vila Viçosa, being part of the shared cultural and spiritual identity of these women. Second, they all are catholic. Third, having a shared recipient prevented the women from feeling they have already lost many of the figures to whom they would possibly like to address their letters.

The gratitude letter writing exercise has been evolving year after year, and the letters are getting more and more sophisticated, with narratives becoming increasingly deeper. This exercise is associated to a ritual that contributes to giving meaning to the experience: first, letters are written, either by the women themselves or by a volunteer who registers the words women

express; then, once the group finishes writing the letters, they are taken to the altar of a local chapel as an offer from the women.

When women write their gratitude letters, it is as if they are traveling to the past, giving life to their memories, and finding new meaning in their relationships: that is to say they seem to go through a re-remembering process. Sometimes they *celebrate the most positive aspects* of the figures who were important to them: "I had good parents, I was loved, I traveled" (woman, 84 years old). "I'm grateful for the parents You gave me. They were the best parents in the world. You also gave me a good husband" (woman, no age reference). "I'm thankful for the great children You gave me. The great son-in-law who was always by my side during the tough times when my husband was sick" (woman, 83 years old). Women also show *appreciation for their past*, even when they refer to times in which they suffered: "I would like to thank Our Lady for having helped my husband until the day he died" (woman, 82 years old). "Our Lady, I'm so grateful for the life You have given me, and the suffering during my time on earth. Despite all that, I help people when they are sick" (woman, no age reference). When the suffering is extreme, gratitude can help *integrate losses and mourning experiences*: "It's the image I worship and love the most, in spite of the tough times I'm going through. She took my son from me, I never stopped praying, asking Her to help the rest of my family" (woman, 94 years old). Gratitude letters also enable an important *reflection about women's present life*: "Our Lady of the Conception, I'm sad now that I'm living in a nursing home and I can't go to the church. I ask You to go to the gatherings every Wednesday, where I feel happy and taken care of" (woman, 96 years old). At the same time, women feel useful, and gratitude letters help them *remember they are "part of the action,"* an action that is every day richer and more attractive: "I'm 84 years old, I can barely see, but I have the grace of living by myself, going to the church, and doing whatever I enjoy" (woman, 84 years old). "I enjoy doing embroidery and sewing, and later selling my work for benefit of those in need. Thank you, Mary, for allowing me to get to 85 years old and still be able to do this" (woman, 85 years old). Finally, gratitude *involves emotional, intellectual and, in this specific case, physical experiences*: "Our Lady, I want to thank you the mother I have who helps me so much. I also thank You for helping me come every Wednesday to the gathering. I love coming here. They all are my good friends" (participant's daughter suffering from mental illness, 58 years old).

As Emmons (2009) suggests, gratitude is a virtue that can be transformative to one's life, if practiced regularly.

Volunteer: "Thank you!"

Woman (86 years old): "Not at all. I'm the one who's grateful for your kindness and for you thinking of me."

If You Were about to Re-Author Your Life, What is the Most Important Thing You Would like to Keep?

“Love. Love, and people getting along with one another. If there isn’t love, there’s nothing. It’s like a garden with no flowers, right? For me, love is sacred. It isn’t about saying ‘I love it, I love it’ and not feeling it in our hearts” (woman, 86 years old).

Questions and answers like these are recurring throughout the year at the Wednesday Tea Project, as women participate in various activities. Through structured and unstructured appreciative questioning processes, women are invited to think about their lives, in general, and about specific events or relevant past moments. A few examples of these processes are: (a) thematic sessions where women are encouraged to describe the landscape of action of unique episodes of their lives regarding a specific topic, e.g., their best Christmas Eve; (b) the Three Blessings exercise, in which women are asked about the three things for which they have been most grateful in the last 2 days; and (c) open-ended questionnaires, which might include: “Would you like to live your youth today?”; “Are women happier nowadays?”; and “What are your dreams for the future?”

These questions tend to elicit conversations around topics that had never been approached in such a generative way. As women talk about positive exceptional moments from the past and unique approaches to life events they engage in a re-authoring process. They are invited to unfold their past experiences, so that they can see their lives are richer than the somewhat limited descriptions they usually share—“Sometimes, when I think about those times ... I suffer a lot, but ... When I think about it, I feel like I’m a happy person” (woman, 75 years old). In doing so, another strong outcome arises: new unexpected levels of action are now a possibility. Without feeling forced, and by extending the discovery of abilities to the present, these women naturally develop a new sense of action for the future. The fact that such process occurs in a group setting facilitates the translation of the recently acquired skills and expectations into new group activities. This means not only that women can now open doors to continue their process of “re-authoring the future,” but they also lead the community to engage in innovative and constructive relationships with a normally distant age group—the elders.

Actually, since the beginning of the project, a stronger involvement of women in the community has emerged, and there are several signs to illustrate it. First, there are a growing number of community activities in which women have been participating: three events in 2010, compared to seven in 2013—“Yesterday, I went to the procession. A lot of people came to greet me and say hello” (woman, 84 years old). Second, women themselves are

serving the role of lead organizers in some activities, many of which were intentionally created by or developed for this group (e.g., a pilgrimage to the largest Portuguese sanctuary). We would like to recall that we are talking about rural old women who spent most their lives working in the fields —“When my sister was born, I was in the third grade. My life was over. Well, I had to start working in the fields. At first I had to weed, and then I started harvesting” (woman, 75 years old). Also, a greater civic engagement has been emerging and we have recently seen this group of old women sign a petition against the closure of a local hospital. The fact that these women are now more visible for the community contributes to people seeing them as active agents of the society and consequently including them in the village's social dynamics, which seemed to be denied to them before.

In summary, the Wednesday Tea Project and its practices have been serving several roles and bringing many benefits to this group of old women, namely: the deconstruction of the dominant social discourse; the public appreciation of women's legacy; the reduction of loneliness feelings by activating women's personal support networks; and the stimulation of new levels of action and plans for future activities.

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Which Metaphor Would Give Meaning to the Experience of Those Involved in this Project?

A possible metaphor could be that of a train ride along the time dimensions line—integration of past, present and future. As women integrated their past, it felt like buying a ticket to travel from past to the future. At the same time, the community standing at the “present station” saw these women passing by—as they are finally visible—and hopped on the train themselves, recognizing that they all share the present. During the ride, old women tell the community what they have experienced so far, and what they see when they look at the “present station.” Together, women and community are advancing to the next stop where a new reality is waiting for them: the future.

Was the Train's Horn Strong Enough to Change a Whole Paradigm?

We don't think so. But we believe it did make people look around and be aware that a new train was arriving at the station. This group of old women is now increasing its levels of participation in community activities as they are invited to events and as they attend ceremonies at the most honorable venues in the village. These old women began to be recognized as physically and emotionally able, even as they adapt to the high number of losses to which they are subject. They are productive and contribute to the community

each in her own way, documented with the publication of the book and the production of handcrafted items.

The description of the decaying old woman became outdated quickly, and this group of women is now travelling with a first-class ticket. They seem to no longer be “portrayed as a marginalized figure—ugly, undesirable, and weak—in the late stages of physical and mental decline” (Gergen & Gergen, 2006, p. 416). We believe they are now integrated in the community—classy and resilient—in unique stages in life that allow them to provide us with their legacy.

We cannot affirm that the old paradigm is gone, but the truth is that there are some signs of change emerging all over the world. From high career level women who are internationally recognized, to the rural old women who were presented in this article, the lives of many women legitimize the need for more constructive words while referring to a life stage that can be meaningful and fulfilling (Cole & Gergen, 2012).

How Can We, Researchers in this Project, Be the Echo of the Train Horn in Our Families, Workplaces, and Groups of Friends?

As we became more involved in this project and reflected about the impact of narrative practices in a group of very old women and its community, we became aware that we are contributing to the creation of a new positive stereotype that does justice to old women's phenomenal accomplishments. As a consequence, our narratives about positive aging are now richer and more profound, and we feel accountable to keep this process alive. Nevertheless, we believe that for other people to change, we must change first. In order to do that, we need to engage in scaffolding conversations ourselves. Our intention now is to identify which steps are necessary for each one of us to make a difference in our own corner of the world, reinforcing our sense of agency and encouraging us to take action.

How Do We Plan to Keep the Change Happening?

MARIA ALEXANDRA D'ARAÚJO:

I will keep studying women aging. I will keep following this group in particular and look to data again and again, questioning it and finding out other important aspects that can contribute to the aging literature. I will go back and conduct more interviews, because I believe we must listen to old women's voices. I feel responsible for sharing this perspective of women aging. I will keep studying women aging in practice and in theory, and I will always try to share what emerges from those studies and invite people of all ages to reflect with me about them.

MARGARIDA ALPUIM:

As a systemic community psychologist, I will: (a) be more respectful of the singularity of the different narratives, integrating them in my own discourse; (b) talk to old women as I used to talk with my grandmother, with care and authenticity, bringing us closer and letting each one of us be what we are meant to be; (c) disseminate this project's successes and transfer the knowledge acquired to other community projects.

CATARINA RIVERO:

The way I look to myself and to other women is in a continuous transformation by every encounter with others, and with new ideas and insights in each moment of any context of my work or personal life. Finding and promoting new narratives is a mission that I take from this work on aging. I believe that it is having an impact on my relationship with myself, with the beautiful women that are in my personal life, but also in my work as a psychotherapist, family therapist, as a trainer and teacher. In everyday life, in my personal and professional relationships, but also as an active citizen, I feel the opportunity and responsibility to spread the seed that (I believe!) contributes to the transformation of our culture in a positive and inclusive way.

HELENA ÁGUEDA MARUJO:

“Midway upon the journey of our life, I found myself within a forest dark, for the straightforward pathway had been lost” (Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*). I've passed the midway of My Journey. The daily physical changes, constantly reminding me of the “oldering” process that is happening out of my control, are a profound challenge for someone who learned to experience life as if it was a predicable given, and lived it as if it could be eternal. In a world where beauty and perfection are horizons, growing older brings the shocking certainty of limitation. That is my pathway for change: to accept and celebrate the changes in myself, and to bring that harmony and serenity to the public and research arena—and therefore, to be sure that the straightforward pathway has not been lost, is never lost.

We would like to challenge the reader to do the same: What are you going to start doing tomorrow that will contribute to change the women aging paradigm in your own corner of the world?

NOTES

1. Authors' translation.
2. Some of the women wrote down the material themselves, and others asked someone to help them either because they did not know how to write or they could not write anymore, due to physical impairment.

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