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# A Legacy of Letters: The Construction of an Aging Masculine Identity

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A LEGACY OF LETTERS: THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN AGING MASCULINE  
IDENTITY

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

K. Tiffani Baldwin

June 2014

Advisor: Dr. Elizabeth A. Suter

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Title: A LEGACY OF LETTERS: THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN AGING  
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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the construction of a masculine identity through a qualitative analysis of personal letters written by an aging man over the last two decades of his life (age 68-89). Symbolic interaction and life-span communication are the guiding frameworks behind the development of the research questions and the subsequent analyses. Research question 1 asks: What themes emerge from the personal letters written by an aging man? The following two themes emerged: a) relationality, and b) age and aging. Research question 2 asks: What do the metaphors that emerge from personal letters reveal about the construction of an aging male identity? A metaphoric analysis produced two conceptual metaphors: a) aging is a tolerable inconvenience, and b) aging is a blessing of time. Overall, the findings from this study suggest the construction of an aging male identity that is highly relational and indelibly shaped by age and aging. The findings contribute to family communication by providing insight into the lived experience of an older man who values the relationships in his life as well as the aging process.

## Acknowledgements

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## **Prologue**

My maternal grandfather, John Charles Mason, was a man beyond measure in my estimation. When I was in my late teens, I began referring to him as “Grampa” in written correspondence. Spelling his name in that way signifies the immense affection and admiration that I have for him. He, too, began referring to himself that way in written communication with me and with others, indicating the significance the special spelling held for him. Grampa was a loving and involved grandfather who, to me, exemplified what it meant to be a man. He set goals and worked hard to achieve them. He was strong in his convictions. He was devoted to his family and deeply valued the people in his life. Though he was sometimes stern and firm, he was always gentle and kind.

As one of the most influential and cherished men in my life, Grampa has significantly shaped the person I am today. He instilled in me a passion for traveling and a love of nature. He inspired a fascination with the night sky. He taught me that I always have the power to change my circumstances. He sparked in me a genuine interest in people and the desire to cultivate and maintain relationships throughout my life. By example, he taught me to be generous with people and unfailingly try to make the world a better place for future generations. He encouraged me to pursue my academic endeavors and a career that I love. For many reasons aside from his letters, the completion of my doctorate program is in large part due to him and his influence in my life.



My parents separated when I was six years old and my mom and I moved in with my grandparents while my mom went back to school and began working full-time. As an only child, I spent quite a bit of time with my grandparents and their generational contemporaries. As a result, from a young age, I had an appreciation for older people that many of my peers did not. I enjoyed their wit and their wisdom and learned many things from all of them. As I grew older, so too did these people I came to care so much about in my younger years. From them, I learned about life, about aging, and about death.

I am particularly grateful for the opportunity to have accompanied Grampa through his process of aging both in his life and through his letters. Long before I read his collection of letters, I thought that Grampa embodied the very meaning of the phrase “growing old gracefully.” Now, after reading his letters, I have a deeper understanding of the grace with which he approached aging. He accepted the challenges of aging and celebrated the joys. He genuinely appreciated the opportunity to grow old. He expressly cherished his family and the people in his life up until the night that he died. His philosophy on aging is reflected in his letters and provides a final and profound lesson for me about how to grow old gracefully.

### **Author**

Grampa was born in 1919 and died at ninety-one years of age in 2010. He was White, heterosexual, married, educated, and in the upper socio-economic class.

Growing up, Grampa lived with his mom, dad, and two younger sisters in Lincoln, Nebraska. Throughout my life, the stories that were told by Grampa and his sisters indicated that they had a close and loving family relationship. When Grampa was

in his early twenties, his father died suddenly of a heart attack. This served as a turning point in Grampa's life. He assumed a more fatherly role with his sisters and took his new role as man of the family very seriously.

Grampa majored in physics in college, but upon graduation decided to pursue a law degree. While he was in law school he met Edith Hawkins, or Gramma Sadie. They married in 1945 and remained married for the next 65 years until Grampa's death. Their marriage survived several problems and at one point they almost divorced; however, their relationship grew closer as they grew older and the grandparents I knew were exceptionally close and loved each other very much.

Grampa enjoyed a forty-four year career as a tax and estate attorney. He began his career in Lincoln, Nebraska and moved to Phoenix, Arizona in his fifties where he continued to practice law. Throughout his life, he was a leader in and active member of multiple professional and community organizations. Upon retirement, he and Gramma Sadie moved to Estes Park, Colorado where they lived for the next twenty-two years until Grampa's death. Up until just a few years before his death, he remained a vital and contributing member of his community.

In addition to practicing law, Grampa was passionate about many things. He and Gramma Sadie travelled extensively throughout the country as well as to various parts of the world. He was an avid outdoorsman, boating captain, pilot, and race car driver. Perhaps one of Grampa's greatest passions was people. His relationships with the people in his life were of utmost importance to him. The travels that he and Gramma Sadie engaged in often included family members and friends. Throughout their lives, they

made a point of visiting people on their trips and inviting people to join them at their home and in their travels.

The importance of people and relationships in Grampa's life is clearly evidenced through his lifelong dedication to letter writing. Since Grampa's death and throughout the process of this study, I have received many family belongings, some of which were passed down from Grampa's parents. As my family and I searched boxes in his storage area, we discovered folders full of letters written by Grampa and saved by his mother. They are letters to his parents that were written when he was away at camp, and then away at college and law school. Letter writing was a dominant form of communication for Grampa that helped him stay in touch with the people he cared about throughout his life.

Grampa was a prolific letter writer as will be evidenced by the sheer number of letters in my data set. The collection used in this study is made of up letters that he wrote over a significant time span—the last two decades of his life. Letter writing was clearly a dominant mode of communication for my grandfather that began in his early years and lasted throughout his lifetime. His letters reflect the full and active life he led. They attend to a variety of topics and are addressed to a multitude of recipients, evidencing the many relationships and experiences that were salient in his later years.

For the purposes of this project, I have chosen only to analyze those letters written by Grampa in the last two decades of his life. I have chosen these letters because they cover the time period that I am interested in exploring in terms of a masculine identity—approximately the period between retirement and death, or later life. As will be established in the literature review, very little is known about the identity construction of

aging men. Grampa's letters provide insight into his negotiation and performance of identity throughout his later years and speak to the importance of including older men in the study of family communication.

### **Researcher Roles**

This project is a very personal one for me in which I have enacted dual roles. As a granddaughter who loves her grandfather very much, I experienced a variety of emotional reactions throughout this project, especially given Grampa's death in the early stages of this study. I am clearly not an objective researcher in regard to this project, however, the goals of qualitative research do not include objectivity or generalization, but representation of lived experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). As Grampa's granddaughter, I am able to provide unique insight into his lived experience as told through his letters. As a budding scholar who recognizes the academic significance that the letters hold, I have steadfastly attempted to use both my personal knowledge of Grampa and my knowledge of the academic study of communication to produce rich and significant findings and interpretations. To do this, I have followed the lead of other communication scholars who have researched their families and remained grounded in the processes of analysis and the practice of self-reflexivity.

Several communication scholars have investigated and written about their own families in academic research. Trujillo (2002) examined how family stories told by his grandmother served to reproduce patriarchy within his family. Goodall (2006) explores his father's CIA career and the impact it had on his family history and identity. Miller (2008) analyzed letters written by her father during World War II to explore how his gendered identity changed during this time. These studies demonstrate that a personal

relationship with the research subject provides an arguably richer and more nuanced analysis. The interpretation of their research is informed and conditioned by their personal knowledge of the subject as well as family history, stories, and further contextual information from family members and friends.

Trujillo (2002) suggests that communication scholars are in a unique position to investigate their own families as we have both academic knowledge and personal knowledge regarding the processes and people in question. He also suggests that he hopes to touch other people through sharing academic wisdom gleaned from his family. He contends that personal stories inspire self-reflection on the part of readers. In this way, personal stories are enhanced by both the personal and academic knowledge of the researcher and have the potential to evoke self-reflection and awareness on the part of readers.

Miller (2008) advocates for a continual process of researcher reflexivity when investigating one's own family. This is an essential component in this kind of project. I have constantly asked myself why I am interpreting things in a certain way. I have also repeatedly asked how my personal knowledge of and relationship with Grampa colored my interpretations and findings. The analysis is likely richer as a result of my subjectivity, and constant self-reflection has been an important aspect of achieving this. Keeping a reflexive journal helped in this process as well as the assistance and generous input from several peer reviewers.

Throughout this project, an important goal of mine has been to view my grandfather's later life through his eyes. Conducting linguistic analyses insured that the findings remain deeply rooted in my grandfather's own voice. In addition, a lesson

learned from the abovementioned three scholars is to remain clear and focused in the research goals and processes of analysis. Their work indicates that this helps keep a personal project on track. Through constant reflexivity and the objectivity offered from my peers, I believe I have achieved this goal. Remaining clear and focused regarding the objectives of the study, combined with a strict adherence to the language used in his letters, has helped keep me grounded in my data and, therefore, in Grampa's voice.

## **Chapter One: Introduction to Study**

Our population is aging. Over the next four decades, the older population in the United States is expected to more than double (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). This is largely due to the baby boomer generation which has already begun to enter older adulthood (Cherlin, 2010). Sixty-five is commonly accepted as the chronological age at which people enter into later life (Cherlin, 2010; Harwood, Rittenour, & Lin, 2013). With the influx of baby boomers entering into later life, it becomes increasingly important to study older people, and in particular, older men.

Historically, women have experienced greater longevity than men. While that trend is projected to continue, the gap in life expectancy between men and women is narrowing (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). Due to advances in medical technology, men are living longer than ever before (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). As a result, increasing numbers of men are estimated to be part of the growing population of older people over the next forty years. These men are and will continue to be valued members of our families, yet family scholarship regarding older men and identity is scarce (Bates & Goodsell, 2013).

Research on aging and gender has traditionally focused more on women than on men, which is likely due to the sex differences in longevity rates (van den Hoonaard, 2007). As a result, very little is known about how older men construct a gendered, or masculine, identity. With the projected increase of men in the aging population, it is

critical to understand how age and gender intersect in the construction of male identity. In response to this lack of knowledge, the field of aging and masculinity was born. In 2006, Thompson referred to this field as being “in its infancy.” (p. 634). Now, less than ten years later, aging and masculinity is a growing field in which older men’s masculinities are being explored. Emergent research suggests that the roles and relationships that older men engage in are important components in the construction of an aging, masculine identity.

This study seeks to extend the growing body of research that examines the lives of older men and merge this topic with family communication. Men are living longer and remaining vital members of our families well into their later years—they are our fathers, grandfathers, uncles, and brothers. They are a cherished part of our relational lives, often having a significant impact on us, but their value and contributions have yet to be studied academically to the same extent as the women in our families (Bates, 2009). Scholarship from the field of aging and masculinity indicates that family is important to men but that they may manage and experience relationships differently than women (Tarrant, 2012). As a result, it is imperative that family communication address the importance of older men’s roles and relationships within the family.

In this dissertation, I follow the lead of communication scholars in my choice of terminology when referring to the older population. I use the terms “older” (Harwood, et al., 2013) and “later life” (Dickson & Walker, 2001) interchangeably throughout this dissertation. I do this to highlight the fact that the group of people I am referring to are considered past middle life yet part of a highly diverse population with differing ages, statuses, and abilities. I refrain from using words such as “elderly” and “old” because



social constructions of these terms suggest frailty and ill-health (Harwood, et al., 2013), and as my study suggests, this population of men do not necessarily embody those traits.

This dissertation is the culmination of a study wherein I qualitatively analyze personal letters written by my grandfather to a multitude of recipients over the last two decades of his life—from age 68 through 89. The layout of the dissertation is as follows:

In this first chapter, I present and explain the theoretical foundations of the study. Symbolic interaction and life-span communication provide the framework for understanding and making sense out of my topic and the results of my analyses. Next, I present a comprehensive review of literature on aging, masculinity, and family communication in which I explore the factors that impact the construction of identity for aging men. I also examine the study of personal letters and how they construct the identity of the author.

In chapter 2, I detail my methodology which is comprised of two linguistic analyses—thematic and metaphoric analyses. This chapter includes a detailed description of the procedures I used to generate my findings. In chapter 3, I present the results of the thematic analysis. I identify two dominant themes that emerged in the analysis. These themes are: (a) relationality and (b) age & aging. I discuss these themes and their subthemes using exemplars from Grampa's letters. Chapter 4 presents the results of the metaphoric analysis. I discuss the two conceptual metaphors that emerged—(a) aging is a tolerable inconvenience and (b) aging is a blessing of time—again using exemplars from Grampa's letters. I also discuss the linguistic metaphors that were present in Grampa's letters.

In chapter 5, I discuss my findings and their meanings as they are explained through symbolic interaction and life-span communication. In the final chapter, I discuss the strengths and contributions of this study before presenting its limitations and suggestions for further research. In the final chapter, I include the outline of a college course inspired by this study before I conclude the dissertation.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

**Overview.** This study is grounded in two conceptual frameworks—symbolic interaction and life-span communication. Symbolic interaction focuses on how identity is constructed through interaction with others, while life-span communication focuses on how people communicatively adapt to life’s changing circumstances throughout the life course. Together these frameworks provide a way of understanding how identity is constructed over one’s life and the role that social interaction plays in that construction. This section begins with an explication of symbolic interaction and then explains life-span communication before joining them through a discussion of the use of language in both.

**Symbolic Interaction.** Symbolic interaction supplies an explanatory framework for examining the communicative construction of individual identity. With roots in social psychology, several scholars have contributed to the development of this theory; however, the origins of symbolic interaction are widely credited to George Mead (1934), though it was named and further elaborated on by Mead’s student, Herbert Blumer (1969). In symbolic interaction, the self is considered active, reflexive, and social. In other words, identity is negotiated and performed through an individual’s ability to be active and reflexive as she interacts in the social world.

From a communication perspective, two assumptions are embedded in symbolic interaction: identity is both social and fundamentally communicative (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005; Suter, Daas, & Bergen, 2008). These two assumptions are not mutually exclusive but are intricately intertwined. As Adler and McAdams (2007) state, “the ever-evolving self is... constructed through interpersonal interaction and situated within a cultural milieu” (p. 98). In other words, identity does not develop in a vacuum. It is through interaction with others, under the umbrella of societal norms, that identity is constructed.

Culture provides norms of behavior which dictate how people should behave in certain situations (Tracy, 2002). Individuals who are socialized into a given culture will likely follow the cultural scripts that have been provided for interaction in particular contexts. In this way, the relationships and interactions that individuals engage in are shaped by the larger societal and cultural norms within which the individuals reside. For example, both age and gender are social identities that are negotiated and performed according to the social constructs associated with both. These stem from society’s dominant ideologies regarding what it means to be a certain age and a particular gender. The ideologies that guide these constructions produce scripts for behavior that society’s members are socialized into through messages from both generalized and particular others (Wood, 1994).

Symbolic interaction suggests that individuals are able to perceive themselves as both subject and object through social interaction (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). It is in this way that people indirectly experience themselves through those messages from others. This is best explained through Mead’s (1934) notion of the “I” and the “Me.” The “I” is the standpoint from which we view ourselves, or experience ourselves

subjectively. The “Me” is the self that we see as an object and that we learn about through interactions with and messages from others. First developed in 1902, Cooley’s (2003) conceptualization of the looking-glass self further explains this notion. Cooley’s perspective holds that we see ourselves as others see us, interpret what meaning that vision holds for the other person, and then develop some sort of self-concept as a result of the interpretation. In this way, appraisals of others are reflected to us and directly impact our self-concept and the construction of identity.

Understanding the self as reflexive and able to conceive of one’s self as both object and subject suggests that we are able to take the role, or perspective, of another (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934, 2003). In other words, people are able to put themselves in the role of another in order to ascertain the possible meanings, interpretations, and subsequent actions of the other person. This in turn allows the individual to conceive herself from the vantage point of others and determine her own meanings, behavior, and actions as a result. Through interaction, messages from generalized and particular others are interpreted and assigned meaning. This negotiation may become internalized, suggesting that the “Me” that is reflected in Cooley’s (2003) looking-glass becomes part of the “I,” or the person’s subjectivity.

As mentioned above, individuals are active and reflexive as well as fundamentally social. In this way, individuals actively negotiate identity through interaction with others. The negotiation of identity involves making meaning from the various situations and interactions that we are involved in. In other words, the self is negotiated as we make sense of ourselves and the world around us. As outlined by Blumer (1969), three basic premises of symbolic interaction are relevant to a discussion of meaning-making and

identity formation. First, humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings they have for those things. This premise suggests that individuals' behavior is determined by the understanding they have of the people, events, and things in their life. Second, meanings result from social interaction. In other words, understanding is socially derived and, therefore, agreed upon by social actors in particular situations. This agreement is based on cultural norms and expectations. Third, meanings are interpreted by people in ongoing situations and dealt with, or acted on, accordingly. In this way, an individual's understanding of the people, events, and things in her life are actively negotiated. This negotiation results in particular behaviors enacted by individuals in particular social situations (Blumer).

These interpretations, meanings, and subsequent actions work together in the construction of an individual's self-concept and, as indicated, are influenced by cultural norms. Stated differently, interpretations are developed through social interaction and help us assign meaning and value to the various people, things, and events in our lives. In this way, we actively and reflexively negotiate our identity. This negotiation then translates into action, or, the performance of identity.

The performance of identity works in conjunction with negotiation (the process of interpreting and meaning-making) and speaks to the ways in which identity is presented in social interaction. The work of Goffman (1959) extends symbolic interaction theory to examine identity using a dramaturgical metaphor. He views identity as a performance in which actors enact particular roles in particular contexts. These roles carry with them expectations regarding behavior so, inevitably, actors perform for an audience. The

purpose of the performance is to supply the audience with an impression that is consistent with the desired identity of the actor (Goffman).

As evidenced by Goffman's (1959) approach, social roles are important in symbolic interaction because people hold various positions in society and in relationships. By naming these positions, or roles, people name their own and others' positions in interactions and form expectations for behavior based on those positions (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005). These positions and relationships are informed by social and cultural ideologies and necessarily impact the overall construction of an individual's identity.

In this way, cultural norms and expectations shape interpersonal relationships and the roles therein. According to this understanding, roles and relationships are temporally, historically, and socially contingent and, therefore, are fluid and always in flux (Pecchioni, Wright, & Nussbaum, 2005). As a result, roles and relationships shift and change over the course of one's life, thereby impacting the continuous construction of identity. Communication is vital in these processes and enables people to adjust and adapt to changing circumstances.

**Life-Span Communication.** While symbolic interaction emphasizes the active and reflexive construction of identity as it is developed in relationship with others, life-span communication complements this theory by focusing on how communication works in this construction across the entire lifespan (Pecchioni, et al., 2005). Life-span communication takes the perspective that communication is inherently developmental (Nussbaum, 2007). In other words, communication is the very foundation of our lives and, inevitably, changes as we develop throughout the life course. While it is obvious

that some communicative processes change as a result of physiological changes as we age (e.g., hearing loss), life-span communication suggests that, as we age, our roles and relationships also change as well as society's expectations for appropriate behavior in social contexts (Nussbaum). As a result, we must communicatively adapt and adjust to changing personal and social circumstances. In this way, change is a central tenet of life-span communication.

Life-span communication scholars are interested in how communication changes across time (Nussbaum, 2007). As identity is inherently social and communicative, life-span communication offers a perspective from which the ongoing construction of identity can be traced across time. Symbolic interaction holds that identity is constructed through relationships (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005). Thus, as relationships change, so too does identity. For example, the communicative skills needed to develop relationships in adolescence are likely different from those needed to develop and maintain relationships in later life (Pecchioni, et al., 2005). Communication is a central factor in these changing circumstances.

Another key feature of life-span communication is the ability to successfully adjust and adapt to changing life circumstances as one ages (Pecchioni, et al., 2005). People may become more adept at handling interpersonal interactions because of a lifetime of interacting in interpersonal situations and the accumulation of skills and attributes. With symbolic interaction's focus on the self as active and reflexive, it stands to reason that people, through active reflexivity, would become better equipped to interact with others as they engage in interactions and then reflect on those interactions. As a result, older individuals may become more competent at handling life's problems

and interpersonal interactions as they have experienced a wide array of life events and situations over their lifetime (Nussbaum, 2007). Through communication, people have the ability to enhance and refine their interpersonal skills throughout their lives (Pecchioni, et al.).

Though the above discussion outlines the communicative aspect of identity, it does not explicitly address how identity is communicated. At the heart of both perspectives is language. People use significant symbols, especially language, in order to accomplish the negotiation and performance of identity. For example, in a study of lesbian mothers, Bergen, Suter, and Daas, (2006) found that nonbiological birth mothers used such referents as address terms and the last name of the nonbiological birth mother to construct a symbolic and legitimate identity for those mothers. In another study, van den Hoonaard (2010) found that male widowers in her study referred to themselves as bachelors instead of widowers to emphasize a masculine identity. These studies demonstrate that people use language to both affirm and deny certain identities.

Communication scholarship further underscores the importance of language to the construction of identity. Tracy (2002) suggests that identity-work is done through discursive practices in everyday talk. She posits two basic ideas: first, talk shapes our identity, and second, our talk is shaped by the social world into which we are born. We use such discursive practices as person referencing, speech acts, and narrative to negotiate and perform identity. In this way, language both reflects and constructs our identity, as well as the social world we live in. Wood (1994) contends that we use self-talk to interpret our experiences and that it affects the ways in which we conceive of ourselves. It is this self-talk that we use as we negotiate other people's meanings and



viewpoints and shape our own self-concept and subsequent performances of identity. As such, language is a primary avenue through which identity is both negotiated and performed.

Language is the basis of our social lives and is used to express one's self, convey meanings, and create shared understandings. In this way, language is used to make sense of the self, others, and the social world. For this reason, symbolic interaction pays special attention to the use of language in interaction (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005). The underlying assumption is that language is a portal through which we can view the personal and social worlds of individuals and, in turn, will provide insight into the identity construction of the individual.

Language, meanings, and interaction are of primary importance in the construction of identity. People use language to make sense of themselves and others. Their interpretations of messages and subsequent meanings are communicatively negotiated and work to affirm or challenge the performance of various identities. Furthermore, language is used in interaction to assert or deny a particular identity. This reinforces the notion that language is central to an exploration of identity and the meanings that people attribute to their experiences.

With an emphasis on the self as active, reflexive, and formed in social interaction, symbolic interaction provides an avenue through which we can understand both the internal and social processes by which individual identity is constructed and negotiated (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005; Wood, 1994). People interpret various interactions, and messages from others, and assign meanings to them. These socially derived interpretations and meanings are negotiated by an individual in the ongoing process of identity construction.

The performance of identity is a direct result of the negotiated meanings taken from social interactions. In addition, the negotiation and performance of identity is bound by the accepted norms of a given culture and often linguistically accomplished.

Further, life-span communication emphasizes how communication works in changing life circumstances. It highlights the changing relational landscape of people's lives over time and how this might impact identity. Life-span communication also posits that people become more adept in interpersonal interactions through the accumulation of skills over the course of one's life. As such, people have the ability to successfully adjust and adapt to those changing life circumstances.

Thus, symbolic interactionism and life-span communication perspectives suggest that aging men will constantly renegotiate their identity in response to new and changing interactions, situations, and contexts throughout their lives. These changes may be particularly salient in older age when social, physical, and mental changes are likely more prevalent than they were at younger ages in the life cycle (Pecchioni, et al., 2005). As aging men engage in social interaction through various situations, their identities are linguistically made and renegotiated. As men enter new life-stage situations and engage in different types of social interaction, symbolic interactionism suggests that they will interpret the meanings of the situations they are presented with and the messages received from generalized or particular others that are important to those situations and, in turn, form their own meanings and behaviors as a result (Blumer, 1969). Life-span communication suggests that aging men have the ability to successfully adapt to their changing situations as a result of a lifetime of accumulated communication competence (Pecchioni, et al.). All of this is vital in the individual construction of identity.

## Literature Review

**Chapter overview.** Age and gender are social identities that shape both how we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived by others. In addition, identity is constructed in and through relationships and the roles we enact within those relationships. In the following review of relevant literature, I explore each of these factors as they contribute to the construction of an aging male identity. First, I begin with a brief discussion of the negative perceptions that surround aging and how those may impact identity. Next, I review literature from aging and masculinity that describes older men's construction of identity, particularly as it pertains to relational roles. Then I turn to a discussion of aging and family communication to explicate the relationships that are likely important to older men. Finally, I briefly review relevant literature on how personal letters construct identity.

**Aging.** In Western society being "old" is associated with loneliness and ill-health (Dykstra, 2010; Nussbaum, 2007). From cultural constructions to personal attitudes, the older population is viewed negatively. This negative view of aging results in ageism, a prevalent issue in our culture which results in the discrimination of people based on age (usually *older* age) (North & Fiske, 2012). As early as three years old, children begin to attach negative stereotypes to older people which include such as attributes as being helpless and passive (Levy, 2003). As children grow, these stereotypes are internalized and become self-stereotypes as they enter older age (Levy, 2009). Research suggests that self-stereotypes may result in self-fulfilling prophecies in which older people actually act older simply because of their perceptions of what it means to be older (e.g., becoming

more forgetful or depressed) (North & Fiske). As such, negative stereotypes impact the construction of an aging identity.

Personal attitudes that older people hold toward aging also impact identity in terms of health and longevity in later life. Positive perceptions of aging are related to overall better health and longevity while negative perceptions may lead to a lower quality of life and higher mortality rates (Levy, Slade, Kunkel, & Kasl, 2002; Levy, Zonderman, Slade, & Ferrucci, 2009). Older people with more positive perceptions of age may benefit from those perceptions through increased cognitive functioning, especially in terms of improved memory (North & Fiske, 2012). In addition, Levy, et al. (2009) found that participants who held negative age stereotypes were twice as likely to experience cardiovascular issues after the age of 60 than those participants who held more positive age stereotypes. Further, people who hold negative views of aging may actually die earlier than those with more positive outlooks (Levy, et al., 2002). These findings suggest that the attitudes people hold toward aging have serious consequences for how they manage and experience the aging process.

Negative stereotypes and attitudes also have a detrimental effect on communication practices in interpersonal communication, especially intergenerational communication (Hummert, 2007, 2010). Communication theories such as Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) suggest that negative stereotypes of aging negatively impact the communicative processes between younger and older generations (Harwood, 2007). For example, CAT demonstrates that negative stereotypes of aging may result in younger people over-accommodating in communication episodes with older people (Harwood, 2007). Over-accommodation is evidenced through talking

loudly, slowly, or with simple sentence structure due to stereotypes that older people cannot hear or understand what is being said. This damages the older person's self-image which is evidenced by older people talking, thinking, and moving more slowly as a result of over-accommodation (Giles, Fox, Harwood, & Williams, 1994).

In sum, attitudes toward aging often lead to negative consequences for older people in terms of a damaged self-concept and lower quality of life. These attitudes may even lead to higher mortality rates for those who hold them. They result in the stigmatization of an aging identity and carry serious implications for the construction of the identity of those considered part of the older population. Much past research perpetuates this stigma.

Research on aging has traditionally focused on the loss and decline that occurs during the aging process (Dickson & Hughes, 2014). In other words, studies to date have examined aging in terms of the biological and psychological losses that occur with age. For example, past research has traditionally associated aging with loss of control and independence, and increased weakness and passivity (Canham, 2009; Harwood, 2007). This research highlights the pathological course of aging.

It is important to distinguish between pathological and normative, or typical, aging (Nussbaum & Ohs, 2009). Pathological aging refers to physical and psychological declines that occur as a result of medical conditions such as Alzheimer's or other dementias (Harwood, et al., 2013). Typical aging refers to the process of aging, which includes natural decline, but is absent other medical conditions. This distinction is important because many older adults are typically aging, yet their experiences are not reflected in research. During normative aging, loss and decline occurs slowly until

approximately the age of eighty when it begins a more rapid decline (Pecchioni, et al., 2005). Older people experiencing normative aging have the potential to lead very active and productive lives well into their later years, yet research rarely reflects this (Dickson & Hughes, 2014).

In Western culture, successful aging refers to being productive, achieving individual accomplishments, and retaining functionality (Pecchioni, Ota, & Sparks, 2004). Defined in this way, those individuals who experience normative aging have the ability to age successfully. This is not to suggest that those with illness or disease may not successfully age in various respects, but the notion of normative aging indicates that there is much potential for successful aging for those individuals who are not experiencing pathological aging (Harwood, 2007).

Research focused on the pathological course of aging detracts from the more typical course of aging that many older adults experience (Nussbaum & Ohs, 2009). Communication scholars agree that more positive research agendas focused on aging are needed in order to provide a fuller, more comprehensive view of the aging process than what currently exists (Dickson & Hughes, 2014). As Dykstra (2011) states, there is a need for “research showing that older people can adapt, enjoy life, and prosper.” (p.6).

Research that highlights the continued activity of aging people and their contributions to society will begin to help dispel some of the negative stereotypes and attitudes that permeate Western culture. Positive attitudes can affect older people positively, just as negative attitudes can have negative consequences (Levy, 2009). With more examples of positive aging available, more people should be able to age successfully (Pecchioni, et al., 2004). For these reasons, it is vitally important to

investigate instances of normative and successful aging, and their relationship to the construction of an aging identity. This is especially true for older men since research pertaining to later life men is limited (Bates & Taylor, 2013; Tarrant, 2012, 2013).

**Aging and masculinity.** As a result of longevity rates and the tendency for females to outlive males, aging studies that attend to gender have focused primarily on women (van den Hoonard, 2007). For this reason, existing theory on aging is predominantly derived from studies of older women and, therefore, results in a perceived feminization of older men and their attendant identities (Mann, 2007; Tarrant, 2012). Characteristics associated with aging, such as dependence and passivity, are traditionally associated with femininity (Canham, 2009). Due to this, older men in particular have been marginalized and constructed as deficient or lacking (Bates, 2009).

The dearth of research on older men has led to a lack of identity scripts for aging men (Spector-Mersel, 2006). Masculinity scripts for Western men are truncated, or cut short, at middle age and are not inclusive of later life masculinity. (Phoenix, Smith & Sparkes, 2010). In consequence, older men struggle to build acceptable masculine identities in light of a lack of cultural scripts. Spector-Mersel and others are calling for more research into men's lived experiences that will facilitate the development of new identity scripts for later life men (Canham, 2009; van den Hoonard, 2009).

Like age, masculinity is a social identity which is fundamental to personal identity. An emerging field of study examines the gendered identity of later life men. This body of research examines how personal identity is negotiated and performed under the social construct of the dominant hegemonic masculinity script (van den Hoonard, 2010). Hegemonic masculinity has been constructed as society's "ideal" masculinity and

produces masculine scripts for being youthful, strong, independent, in control, powerful, having sexual prowess, serving a provisional role, and, most importantly, rejecting all things feminine (Boden, 2008). As a result, older men must negotiate their identities within the confines of a masculine ideal that may no longer be appropriate, within a societal context that holds negative attitudes regarding age.

Aging and masculinity research demonstrates that older men are aware of the hegemonic ideal and either attempt to approximate it or subvert it (Tarrant, 2012; van den Hoonaard, 2010). The negotiation of an aging masculine identity is primarily accomplished through the use of language. Aging and masculinity scholarship demonstrates that male participants use language to either approximate hegemonic masculine ideology or create alternative masculinities within specific relational contexts.

Older men who try to approximate the ideal masculinity linguistically reframe aging experiences in masculine ways. For example, Bennett (2007) found that the male widowers in her study used language to conform to dominant masculine ideals. They superimposed descriptions of grief and loss with talk of control, rationality, responsibility and successful action. In addition, van den Hoonaard (2009, 2010) found that the widowers in her study worked hard to approximate hegemonic masculine ideals in the interview situation. For example, they used diminutives when addressing the female interviewer and referred to themselves as bachelors instead of widowers, thereby linguistically reconstructing and asserting their identity as predominantly masculine.

In contrast, there are men in masculinity and aging studies who create alternative, or expanded, masculinities. In her study of widowers, Bennett (2007) found that a minority of participants talked more freely about their feelings, and experienced grief



more publicly than other men in her study. In Alex, Hammarstrom, Norberg, and Lundman's (2008) study of the construction of masculinity among older men in Sweden, they identified the emergent theme of "being related." This theme is evidenced by the importance of relationships in participant narratives which constructed family as part of the meaning of life. Part of this construction of masculinity included men's happiness with and gratitude for being alive as well as perceiving aging in a positive light. These studies demonstrate a masculine identity that highlights relationships and emotional expression.

The grandfather role may serve as an illuminating site from which to study both aging and masculinity. Scholars suggest that being a grandfather significantly impacts the negotiation and performance of identity for older men (Mann, 2007; Sorensen & Cooper, 2010). Research on grandfathers is still limited; however, extant studies reveal that the grandfather role allows older men to create an identity that is more gentle and nurturing than the identity they might have enacted as fathers (Davidson, Daly, & Arber, 2003).

Tarrant's (2012) study found that the grandfathers in her study were actively involved in cultivating relationships with their grandchildren. These grandfathers participated in their grandchildren's lives in a variety of ways: they took their grandchildren to doctor's appointments, joined them in after school activities, and played with them. In addition, these grandfathers performed various care tasks such as diaper changing and meal preparation (Tarrant). The grandfathers in Mann and Leeson's (2010) study were also actively involved with their grandchildren and found being a grandfather to be emotionally rewarding. In addition, these grandfathers also participated in care

tasks such as babysitting, feeding, and putting their grandchildren to sleep. These studies suggest that grandfathers create identities as caring and involved family members. For these reasons, aging and masculinity scholars suggest that the grandfather role is ideal for examining the intersections of aging and masculinity in a family context (Boden, 2008; Sorensen & Cooper, 2010).

Thus far, I have examined factors pertaining to the construction of an aging identity, especially as it relates to older men and their masculine identities. Though research is limited, extant research indicates that older men may struggle to construct identity in light of hegemonic ideals and negative views of aging. It also indicates that relationships are central to the construction of an aging, masculine identity.

Personal relationships are a key factor in both physical and mental well-being throughout the life span (Nussbaum & Ohs, 2009). Though research suggests that older people's social support networks diminish with age, socioemotional selectivity theory posits that older people tend to focus their relational energies on positive and emotionally rewarding relationships, resulting in higher satisfaction with remaining members of their social networks (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). Often, these relationships tend to be with family members.

Scholarship in aging and family communication has grown in the last decade (Stamp & Shue, 2014); however, very little focuses on the relationships of older men in families. Although family communication scholarship does not highlight the familial relationships that appear to be important to older men in particular, it does address older people in general. These significant relationships include: spousal relationships, sibling

relationships, older parent-adult child(ren) relationships, and grandparent-grandchild(ren) relationships.

**Aging and family communication.** In this section, I provide an overview of each of the significant types of family relationships that are researched in aging and family communication, followed by an explication of the brief findings as they specifically pertain to men. I also examine recent research which looks at the role of uncles in the family.

*Older men and spousal relationships.* Marriage appears to be beneficial for older adults (Dickson & Hughes, 2014). Older married people tend to have more social support and report higher levels of satisfaction than those who are not married (Harwood, Rittenour et al., 2013). In fact, the importance of the marital relationship may increase with age as marital partners become increasingly dependent on each other for both companionship and physical assistance (Braithwaite, 2002). Further, research suggests that older married couples may be healthier and happier than their younger counterparts due in part to less engagement in conflict, the expression of affection, and prioritizing one's spouse over all else (Dickson & Hughes). In short, many older marriages are happy and perceived to be satisfying (Harwood, Rittenour, et al.).

In specific regard to men, research indicates that they may benefit more than women in later life marriages due to husbands' reliance on wives' social support networks after the husbands' retirement from the workforce, and the likelihood that husbands will require caregiving earlier than wives (Harwood, et al., 2013). In addition, men experience a significant decrease in life satisfaction upon the loss of a spouse and also appear to benefit more than women from gaining a spouse later in life after the loss

of a previous spouse (Chipperfield & Havens, 2001). Dickson and Walker (2001) found that older married men in their study were more emotionally expressive and willing to discuss their relationship than their wives. These findings suggest that older married men benefit tremendously from marriage in later life and may be more relationally oriented than previously thought.

***Older men and sibling relationships.*** Relationships with siblings are likely the longest standing relationships individuals will have over the course of their lives (Nussbaum & Ohs, 2009). These relationships may grow closer or more distant at different points during the lifespan, but many siblings tend to become closer as they grow older (Mikkelsen, 2014). Siblings offer both instrumental and emotional support to each other in older age and use relational maintenance strategies such as positivity in their communication behaviors (Goodboy, Myers, & Patterson, 2009). In addition, motives for communication among older siblings include intimacy, comfort, and maintaining a sense of family (Fowler, 2009). Finally, gender differences appear to be a factor in sibling relationships as well. Research suggests that women tend to be closer to and more supportive of siblings than do men (Mikkelsen); however, these findings are read with sensitivity to the fact that men have been understudied.

***Older parent-adult child(ren) relationships.*** Though parents often continue to provide various kinds of care and support to children once those children enter adulthood (Segrin & Flora, 2011), the majority of research on older parents and their adult children examines the caregiving that occurs from adult children to their aging parents (Harwood, et al., 2013). Caregiving often results in role reversals which need to be managed by both parties and can cause tension between autonomy and paternalism (Hummert, 2007).

Much of the research pertaining to older parent-adult child(ren) caregiving examines the relationships between mothers and daughters, as it is mothers who tend to need the care and daughters who tend to provide it (Nussbaum & Ohs, 2009). Though Floyd and colleagues have examined father-son relationships, older fathers are not the focus of these studies and the average age of the fathers in the studies is well below 65 (Floyd & Bowman, 2006; Morman & Floyd, 2002; Morman & Floyd, 2006). As such, older fathers are virtually nonexistent in conversations about older parents and their adult children.

*Grandparent-grandchild relationships.* With the increase of longevity in the lifespan, families are becoming increasingly intergenerational and more people are living to become grandparents and even great-grandparents (Soliz & Lin, 2014). Nearly 90% of individuals over the age of 65 who are parents are also grandparents and nearly half of those are great-grandparents (Folwell & Grant, 2006). In addition, these grandparents will likely see their grandchildren reach adulthood (Monserud, 2010). In one recent study, a quarter of the grandparent respondents report that an adult grandchild is a valued member of their social network (Geurts, Van Tilburg, & Poortman, 2012).

Scholarship in aging and family communication has focused considerable attention on the grandparent-grandchild (GP-GC) relationship. This research demonstrates that the grandparent-grandchild relationship is beneficial to both parties (Segrin & Flora, 2011) and is a primary and enduring source of intergenerational contact and communication (Soliz & Lin, 2014). Though research on GP-GC relationships has grown considerably in the last decade and a half (Stamp & Shue, 2014), there are only a few references to grandfathers in the literature. The experiences of grandmothers and

grandfathers tend to be combined with minimal differentiation based on the sex of grandparent (Bates, 2009; Mann, 2007).

The research that does reveal gender differences tends to contrast grandfathers with grandmothers. One finding focuses on topics of conversation, indicating that grandfathers talk about history and health issues while grandmothers tend to talk about family history and relational issues (Soliz, Lin, Anderson, & Harwood, 2006). In addition, research suggests that grandfathers play a more instrumental role in the lives of their grandchildren by providing advice on such things as education and career, while grandmothers focus more on emotional involvement with grandchildren (Soliz & Lin, 2014). Further, grandfathers, particularly paternal grandfathers, are found to have the least involvement with their grandchildren when compared to grandmothers, and particularly maternal grandmothers (Folwell & Grant, 2006). These scant references hardly provide a comprehensive picture of grandfathers' roles and relationships within the family; however, family scholars provide some important insights and starting points for understanding.

In family studies, Bates and his colleagues (Bates, 2009; Bates & Goodsell, 2013; Bates & Taylor, 2013) argue for more research and theorizing on grandfathers and their roles and relationships within families. In contrast to previous research findings, they suggest that grandfathers want to be involved with their grandchildren and actively strive to maintain relationships with grandchildren (Bates & Taylor). In addition, research indicates the importance of male kin relationships and the intergenerational transmission of values and relational behaviors from grandfathers to grandsons (Bates & Goodsell).

In connection with the idea of intergenerational transmission, Bates (2009) provides a conceptual framework for studying grandfathers and their family relationships. He suggests the idea of generative grandfathering which he describes as grandfathers who actively engage in caring for and nurturing their grandchildren. In this way, Bates borrows the idea of generative grandfathering as being “work” from the generative fathering literature, but stresses that being a grandfather is distinctly different from being a father. Generative grandfathering is comprised of six concepts: lineage work, mentoring work, spiritual work, recreation work, family identity work, and investment work (Bates). As such, this conceptual framework is based on the premise that grandfathers choose to devote their time and energy to the development of their grandchildren in a variety of ways.

In addition to Bates’ work which suggests generativity as a framework from which to explore grandfathers’ roles within the family, research on the role of uncles in family communication is emerging as well. Though recent research on uncles is not specific to *older* uncles, it does indicate that uncles may play a valuable role in families and that generativity is a factor in uncles’ relationships with their nieces and nephews. As such, it provides insight into another male role within families that is understudied, but likely very important in contemporary families.

*Uncles in families.* As with grandfathers, generativity is apparent in uncle-nephew relationships (Milardo, 2005, 2010). Four dimensions of generativity emerged in Milardo’s (2005) interviews with uncles: they served as mentors, intergenerational buffers, meaning keepers, and fellow travelers. Uncles were actively involved in teaching their nephews various life lessons, acting as intermediaries between nephews

and their parents, maintaining a sense of family and family history, and building mutual friendships with their nephews. Though some uncles may remain relatively uninvolved with their nieces and nephews, Milardo's work shows that there are uncles in contemporary families who value their relationships with their nieces and nephews and, in turn, are valued by those nieces, nephews, and the parents of those children. This suggests that some uncles desire to be actively involved with and helpful toward younger generations.

*Kinkeeping in families.* The literature on the potential generativity of the grandfather and uncle roles suggests that kinkeeping may be an aspect of these roles. Kinkeeping involves maintaining family relationships and identity and is typically considered to be the purview of women in families. In the first study of kinkeeping communication within families, Leach and Braithwaite (1996) found that middle aged women were identified as the primary kinkeepers in families and that kinkeeping behaviors include providing assistance and information to family members and maintaining family relationships. In a recent study on kinkeeping, Brown and DeRycke (2010) report that the majority of their participants indicated that women were the family kinkeepers, though they also indicate that men perform kinkeeping activities as well. Interestingly, the lowest levels of perceived kinkeeping were associated with both maternal and paternal grandfathers. As a result of recent research on grandfathers, scholarship pertaining to men as family kinkeepers is growing, but still limited and inconclusive.

*Friendship in older age.* Although family relationships have historically been defined as connections between people who are related by blood or by law, recent



literature in family communication is expanding the definitions to include friendship in constantly evolving family constellations (Floyd & Morman, 2014; Galvin, 2013).

Emergent scholarship on voluntary kin indicates that people may develop family-like relationships that are discursively negotiated and characterized by deep caring and committed relationships (Braithwaite et al., 2010). These relationships are borne out of friendship and may be of particular significance to older people.

Like many family relationships, friendships in older age are also relatively understudied but extant research suggests that friendships may have a significantly positive impact on older adults (Stevens & Van Tilburg, 2011). Social support is important to maintaining health in older age and friends may be important providers of support (Pecchioni, et al., 2005). Friends can help older adults maintain a sense of autonomy by providing support and companionship (Rawlins, 2004). They also help people change and adapt to new circumstances while maintaining a sense of continuity and confirming changing identities (Stevens & Van Tilburg). Older adults typically have different sets of friends from different periods of their lives, each of which is considered an important part of a full life (Nussbaum, Pecchioni, Robinson, & Thompson, 2000). Though no studies were located that looked specifically at voluntary kin in older adults, research indicates that friends may substitute for or supplement family relationships in later life.

Though very little is known about older men in families or in friendship, what is known paints an essentialist picture (Tarrant, 2012) that depicts men as either undesiring or incapable of cultivating and maintaining relationships on their own, or both. In a society that devalues aging and highlights youthful notions of masculinity, aging men

appear to be at a serious disadvantage. However, older men are vital and valued members of our families and society. Examining their roles and relationships within the family and beyond can provide a context in which more realistic identity scripts for aging men might be discovered.

**Letters.** There are multitudes of ways to go about researching the identity construction of older men. Many of the studies in aging and masculinity utilize interviews and focus groups. One could also conduct participant observations, surveys, or use a variety of quantitative measurements to provide insight into this phenomenon. An undeniably rich approach to the study of aging, masculinity, and identity is through the analysis of personal letters written by an aging man over the last two decades of his life. As indicated by symbolic interaction, attention must be paid to language in use (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005). Letters are a form of material interaction and have the robust potential to reveal the construction of identity through language in use.

For centuries, personal letters have been a primary medium in maintaining and fostering interpersonal relationships (Banks, et al., 2000). They connect loved ones and help them to communicate over long distances of time and geography. They serve political and social functions that are a part of our culture's history. Letter writing became a dominant form of communication in early America between people in Britain and the American colonies (Dierks, 2009). Letters substituted for absence and had the ability to convey the political climate of the time as well as family news and information. The spread of postal systems meant that personal letters became a medium of communication available to the majority of people (Haggis & Holmes, 2011),

However, long before letter writing became engrained in America's history, letters were studied by scholars. The formal study of letters began as early as the 1500's (Goldsmith, 1989). Over time, the study of letters has grown into a multidisciplinary endeavor that includes such disciplines as English, literary studies, and feminist and women's studies (Jolly, 2008). Regrettably, letters are rarely used in communication research. This is likely due to the fact that most people do not save letters and, in the age of technology, letter writing is not only a dying art, it has been replaced by more immediate forms of communication such as texting and emailing (Haggis & Holmes, 2011). However, a few studies were located in communication studies that examine personal letters. Of particular relevance to this study is Miller's (2008) study in which she uses the letters written by her father during World War II to trace the development of his masculine identity during that time. Miller's study provides an example of how personal letters work to construct the identity of the author and underscore that, when available, letters can be a rich source of knowledge, providing insight about the writer, the recipients, their relationship, and the myriad ways in which identities are constructed, maintained, and change over time (Couser, 2011).

Identity is constructed through the representative, relational, and social nature of letters (Jolly & Stanley, 2005; Stanley, 2004). In other words, letters reflect aspects of the self, the relationship between writer and recipient(s), and the social world in which they are situated. Letters are representative because they are a performance of self by the writer. Stanley (2004) suggests that letters are an epistolary emanation of the writer and serve to "stand for" the writer, based on the writer's own choices regarding the enactment of a performance of identity in the letters. Letters are a performance of self that is

carefully and intentionally created for the benefit of the recipient (Banks, Louie, Einerson, 2001). They are also representative of the moment in which they were written. Letters are always written in the present tense and as such, represent both certain aspects of the writer and certain historical and social moments (Jolly, 2008).

Letters are relational in that they signify both the relationship between the writer and the recipient, and the interpretations the writer is making about the recipients own interpretive meanings and social positions. In essence, letters provide insight into the writer's world as well as the writer's perceptions of the recipient's world. Letters are often part of an ongoing relationship. Stanley (2004) notes that there are two types of letters: one-off letters and letters that are part of a correspondence. One-off letters are those that are written without any anticipation of ongoing epistolary interaction. Letters that are a part of correspondence, on the other hand, anticipate ongoing interaction and a response from the reader, even if that response is not expected in writing. Regardless of the type, letters both reflect and construct a relationship as they are often used to continue communication when face to face interaction experiences an interruption (Stanley, 2011). In short, they are a form of interaction that builds knowledge and understanding between the writer and recipient in conjunction with the relationship that is built outside of the epistolary world.

Letters are social in nature as they provide a portal into a world beyond the written word that may not be explicitly addressed within the text of the letter but is nonetheless taken for granted by both the writer and the recipient (Jolly, 2008; Stanley, 2011). As mentioned above, letters are written in certain historical and social moments and, therefore, speak to the cultural and relational norms that are inherent in the world of

both writer and recipient. As such, written correspondence reflects the social ideologies of the time and the expectations for interaction between people (Jolly). In addition, a collection of letters spanning a substantial period of time will likely indicate changes in the social and historical moments in which they were written.

Therefore, letters are a unique way to enter the subjective, lived experience of the writer. They offer a linguistic performance of identity and provide an insider's perspective into the relationships between the writer and recipient. Through a carefully crafted missive, the interpersonal relationships and social world of the writer are revealed. Letters can tell us not only what is salient for the writer, but also what the writer interprets to be salient to the recipient. In this way, letters allow us to discern not only the identity of the author but the variety of relational factors that impact an evolving identity. Personal letters are not written for research purposes and, as such, provide an account of the social and historical worlds of the writer, and possibly the recipients, which would be difficult to adequately capture through traditional research settings and data collection processes. Thus, analyzing a corpus of personal letters written by an aging man over the last 20 years of his life has the power to provide much needed insight into the construction of his aging masculine identity.

### **Research Gap**

As previously established, there is a dearth of research pertaining to later life men in family communication. With the increases in the aging population in general and life expectancies for men in particular, it is vitally important that communication scholars seek to understand the identity construction and relational lives of older men. These men are valued members of our families, yet we know very little about them. The scant

research available in family communication presents limiting comparisons between men and women, and finds men lacking in both subtle and significant ways (Bates, 2009). Extant family communication scholarship suggests that relationships are not a priority for older men and that they do not actively work to foster and maintain the relationships in their lives. Scholarship in aging and masculinity reveals that constructing masculinity in later life may be challenging for men because of a lack of cultural scripts (Spector-Mersel, 2006). This scholarship also demonstrates that the relationships and roles that older men engage in significantly impact their identity and may provide a space from which aging men can construct acceptable masculine identity scripts (Tarrant, 2012). As such, it is vitally important that family communication redress this gap and expand its purview to include the later life experiences of the growing population of aging men in our families and in society.

### **Research Questions**

Symbolic interaction and life span communication suggest that language is a primary avenue through which identity is constructed. Aging and masculinity scholarship demonstrates that older men utilize language as a means to either approximate or deviate from hegemonic masculinity in the construction of an aging identity. In order to explore the identity construction of a later-life man through his personal letters, attention must be paid to the language used in his letters (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005). As the basis of our social lives, language both shapes and reflects identity. Personal letters are a form of language in use which is representative of the author's identity (Stanley, 2004).

For the purposes of this project, identity construction is conceptualized as an ongoing process that continues throughout the lifetime (Pecchioni, et al., 2005). I conceptualize the term “construction” as encompassing both the negotiation and the performance of identity. Negotiation is understood to be the interpretive meaning-making process in which one internally makes sense of the self in relation to the social world (Blumer, 1969). Performance is understood as the way in which identity is enacted, or externally displayed, in interaction (Goffman, 1959). Negotiation and performance are seen to have a reciprocal relationship in that one affects the other. Negotiation of identity results in a particular performance of identity. That performance, and the reaction (real or imagined) of others, may then invoke a renegotiation of identity, which in turn may lead to an altered performance of identity. Thus, the two work in tandem in the continual construction of identity.

Personal letters provide insight into the linguistic negotiation of who the author was and how he made sense of himself, his relationships, and his experiences over the last twenty years of his life. Personal letters may be particularly telling as they were not written for research purposes, but in fact were written for a variety of interpersonal reasons (Jolly & Stanley, 2005). As a result, the identity that is revealed in the letters is a representation of the identity of the man and not a representation of how the man would portray his identity in a traditional research setting.

In order to conduct a linguistic analysis of the letters with a focus on identity, two separate analytical methods are used—thematic and metaphoric analyses. Thematic analysis has the ability to depict the interpretations that people use to make sense of their experiences and the meanings that they attribute to those experiences (Smith, 1995). The

aim, then, of thematic analysis is to understand both the content and the complexity of a participant's interpretations and meanings. Themes are conceptualizations of people's varied experiences and offer insight into the ways in which people make sense of their lives and relationships (Keyton, 2006). In this way, themes that emerge from a research text help us to understand the salient meanings of a given experience as reported by participants.

Utilizing thematic analysis in the study of personal letters allows for the analysis to stay grounded in the language used in the letters. The themes that surface will provide insight into the ways in which Grampa makes sense out of, and applies meanings to, himself and the world around him. In this way, a thematic analysis allows for capturing the interpretations and meanings that are important to his reporting of his later years and, taken together, can help inform how his identity was negotiated and performed through his experiences and interactions over the years. In short, themes will demonstrate what mattered most to Grampa in his later years. Thus, I pose the following research question:

**RQ1: What themes emerge from the personal letters written by an aging man?**

A thematic analysis provides emergent interpretations of Grampa's letters and lays the foundation for a metaphoric analysis. Metaphoric analysis provides an overall account of how a person cognitively conceives of things and what concepts and cultural values are salient for them (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In this way, metaphor can shed light on the unconscious and implicit thought processes in which individuals engage and provide a portal from which we are able to view how a person makes sense of the various experiences in their life and conceptualizes the world (Lakoff, 2008). As a result,



metaphor speaks to identity issues as interpretation and meaning making are central to the construction of identity.

Metaphoric analysis has the ability to capture the individual meaning making and social processes that inform the interpretive process that Grampa is engaging in and the meanings he attributes to the experiences in his later years. The language used in his letters will reveal metaphors that shaped my grandfather's thought processes, and therefore his life. Though this is similar to the aims of a thematic analysis, interpretation in metaphoric analysis requires that the analyst move to a more inferential level of analysis (Suter, Reyes, & Ballard, 2010). In this way, the findings of this study are more intricately layered and explicated through the addition of metaphoric analysis. In other words, it will enable me to go deeper into Grampa's negotiation and subsequent performances of identity. Thus I pose the following research question:

**RQ2: What do the metaphors that emerge from personal letters reveal about the construction of an aging male identity?**

### **Significance**

I have chosen to answer the research questions by using the personal letters written by my grandfather for specific reasons. Grampa embodies McAdams' (2006) notion of the generative adult. Generative adults strive to pass on aspects of themselves that will continue to live on long after the person's death. Grampa was a highly generative adult who, through both his career and personal life, strove to make a difference in the world and leave his mark on society. According to McAdams, highly generative adults are:

Motivated by strong needs to have a positive impact and to connect to others in loving ways, (they) appear to be more effective and involved as parents, community members, and citizens, and they enjoy wider social networks and generally better mental health than adults who score lower on psychological measures of generativity. (p. 39)

Grampa is a quintessential example of an aging man who lives his life in a way that he hopes will leave a legacy for others to follow. As established, scholars are calling for more positive examples of aging that show that older people can live full and productive lives well into their later years. Grampa was an especially contemplative man who thought deeply on his experiences and relationships in his life. He took great care in articulating his thoughts when communicating with other people. His letters reflect this by capturing his essence on paper and evidencing the full life he led until shortly before his death at 91 years of age.

I have chosen to use only Grampa's letters as the basis for this study because they are a robust and extensive text that detail Grampa's experiences while aging over the last two decades of his life. His contemplation and articulation of those experiences in his letters capture his lived experience in a way that only his language and use of wording can accomplish. Thus, in order to strictly adhere to the language used in his letters, it is important to rely only on the letters as the sole text. As will be shown in the next chapter, Grampa's letters are not one or two paragraph letters that simply inform the recipient of something. Instead, they are often lengthy and address a variety of topics in detail. Further, Grampa saved his letters for a purpose. Though I cannot know for certain his reasoning, I believe that it is, at least in part, due to his highly generative nature and his desire to leave his mark on the world. People rarely save their own letters and, those letters that are saved tend to be saved by women (Jolly, 2008). For these reasons, it is my

contention that the analysis of Grampa's letters provides an answer to the calls for more positive research into the lived experiences of older people, especially older men.

## **Chapter Two: Methods and Procedures**

### **Chapter Overview**

This study examines the aging male identity as it is constructed through the personal letters written by an aging man over the last two decades of his life. In order to provide an understanding of Grampa's identity as portrayed through the letters, a two-part qualitative analysis was conducted. In this chapter, I detail the research methods and procedures that were followed. First, I describe my unique data set and the storage and management of this substantial corpus. Next, I detail the two research methods used in this study—thematic and metaphoric analyses—and the specific procedures involved with both. Last, I outline the steps taken to promote validity in this study.

### **Data**

The data set for this study consists of a collection of 497 letters authored by Grampa over the last two decades of his life, from 1987-2008, when he was 68-89 years old. Of the 497 letters, the majority are typed ( $n = 493$ ) and only a few ( $n = 4$ ) are handwritten. Grampa's collection of letters includes both letters mailed through the United States Postal Service as well as emails. Of the 497 letters, 74 are emails. In this study, the term "letters" encompasses both postal letters and emails.

The length of each letter varies. The collection of letters adds up to 819 total pages. The average length is 1.65, or almost 2 pages per letter. 67% of the letters are 1 page ( $n = 334$ ), 25% of the letters are 2 pages ( $n = 123$ ), and 8% of the letters are 3-7

pages ( $n = 40$ ). Some letters ( $n = 37$ ) also include inserts (i.e., a newspaper clipping, a cartoon, or a letter to/from mutual friends or family members).

Grampa wrote the corpus of letters used in this study between 1987-2008. Only one letter was written in 2008; however, I chose to include this one letter as it is one of the last letters that Grampa wrote. It was sent to his friends and explains his debilitating health as the reason he was no longer writing and sending letters. Due to his physical deterioration, the 2008 letter was dictated by my grandfather and typed by his daughter. Grampa signed all typed letters by hand.

The letters written from 1987-1997 were created by Grampa on a word processor, specifically, an IBM Displaywriter produced circa 1982. In 1997, Grampa purchased and began using a personal computer. The letters from 1997 were written by Grampa on both the word processor and the PC. By 1998, Grampa typed all letters on the PC.

The letters that comprise this data set were saved by both Grampa and me. Out of the 497 letters, I saved approximately sixty ( $n = 60$ ). Early in the 1990's, I began to recognize that my grandfather's letters might have some future significance and started saving many of the letters I received from him. These sixty letters that I saved include some that are addressed only to me, and some that are addressed to multiple recipients (i.e., myself and other family members or friends of Grampa's). In addition, some of these letters were not originally addressed to me, but my grandfather would often share letters he wrote to other people with me because he thought I might be interested in the letter's contents. For example, he might write a letter to one of his sisters regarding some

aspect of their early childhood, but then send copies of that letter to me and other family members or friends in order to share that particular piece of family history.

As the conceptualization of this project began to take shape, and with permission from Grampa, I searched his files for anything he might have saved. Likely due to his training and career as an attorney, my grandfather kept thorough and extensive records. The search of his files produced the remaining 437 letters.

The letters saved by Grampa are included as part of his personal correspondence files. He saved more letters in these files, but I have excluded some for practical purposes. Plummer (2001) suggests that the study of letters necessarily includes a cull rate in which some letters must be excluded due to the problem of little analytic worth. The letters that I have excluded are such letters as those that accompany a charitable donation and consist only of information regarding the contribution, letters regarding committee or board meetings that only include specific information regarding those meetings, and letters he wrote for specific and miscellaneous reasons (i.e., letter to a plumber regarding a sewage problem). These have been excluded because they are not written to friends or family members and include very brief and specific information.

Stanley (2004) notes that there is a difference between one-off letters and letters that are part of a correspondence. One-off letters are those that are written without any anticipation of ongoing epistolary interaction. Letters that are a part of correspondence, on the other hand, anticipate ongoing interaction and a response from the reader, even if that response is not expected in writing. Grampa's collection of letters includes both. Most of his letters to friends and family were written as part of an ongoing

correspondence. In some cases, but certainly not all, I also have a copy of the correspondence from his family members or friends.

The letters are addressed to multiple people. Often, just one letter is addressed to multiple recipients. Addressees include, but are not limited to, people in Grampa's immediate and extended families, former in-laws, friends, former business associates, and doctors. In this way, the letters provide an avenue through which to determine the roles my grandfather enacted in his later years and the relationships that were important to him. Oftentimes the signature line will indicate the relational role Grampa is enacting as well as have some relevance to the content of the letter. For example, in letters to his sisters he might sign, "Your concerned big brother," or "Your nosey big brother." In addition to the signature line, Grampa often referred to his role within the body of letters.

In general, the letters appear to serve various purposes. The letters are used to thank, inform, congratulate, advise, wax philosophical, and provide condolences. The letters share stories and facts about Grampa's life and travels. They also share stories of other family members' lives and travels as well as those of his friends. They report on health, education, careers, and social issues that are pertinent to Grampa's social network as well as inquire into those of his recipients. In short, they explore life's challenges and celebrations. Grampa's letters chart the everyday events of a man's life, the occasions that are cause for celebration as well as those that are cause for concern. The letters serve as an articulation and acknowledgement of the meaning he ascribes to the various experiences and relationships he has in his later life.

The substantial data set utilized for this study required specific and detailed organizational management and storage. Below, the steps taken to manage and store Grampa's letters will be described.

### **Data Management and Storage**

First, Grampa kept his letters in manila folders labeled by year. I organized all the letters within each folder into chronological order and numbered them accordingly. For example, the first letter written in 1990 is numbered 1990\_1 and the last one is 1990\_21. These letter numbers are written in the upper right hand corner of the original letters. This numbering system is used throughout the rest of this dissertation to reference particular letters where appropriate.

Next, all of the original letters were digitized, keeping the integrity of the letters preserved (i.e., the digitized copies are exact duplicates of the original copies and thus maintain their original state) (Stanley, 2004). The letters were scanned into a university copy machine and the files saved as Adobe Acrobat PDF documents. Each year was scanned as its own document. For example, every letter from 1990 was scanned as a continuous document that was then titled "1990." For the purposes of data management and storage, emails and postal letters were scanned into two separate documents. This resulted in two different PDF documents for the years that consist of both emails and postal letters. These documents are titled accordingly (e.g., 2001\_emails; 2001\_letters). All of these documents are password protected and saved in a folder entitled "Grampa's Letters" on my personal computer as well as an external hard drive. The original letters are saved in a locked file box in my home office.



Two hard copies of each letter were printed for analytic purposes. One set of hard copies is saved in three-ring binders in my home office. Each binder is organized and titled according to the date and year of the letters included within that folder (e.g., 1988-1990). The second set of copies is saved in a file box in my home office. I have also created a master list of the collection of letters on an excel spreadsheet that includes the assigned letter number (i.e., 1990\_1) and type of document (i.e., letter, email), the recipient(s), the date and year in which it was written, and, in some cases, notes regarding the document (e.g., if an insert is included with the file).

An important last, but critical, note in this section touches on the ethical implications of using personal letters in research. The university's institutional review board told me that I do not need to have this study approved by them, as it does not include talking to or observing human subjects. However, for my own ethical reasons and as a potential safeguard, I have a signed letter from Grampa granting me permission to use his "personal correspondence" in my "academic endeavors." This letter was typed by his daughter and signed by him in 2010.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis for this study was twofold. First, I began with a thematic analysis which laid the foundation for the second analysis, a metaphoric analysis. Below, I describe the specific procedures for both, starting with thematic.

**Thematic analysis.** The first research question asks: what themes emerge from the personal letters written by an aging man? To answer this question, I conducted a thematic analysis of the letters. Themes are recurring patterns that capture the essence of

a text and offer insight into the ways in which people understand and conceptualize their lives, relationships, and experiences (Keyton, 2006; Morse, 2008). The aim of a thematic analysis of Grampa's letters is to understand both the content and the complexity of his lived experience during his aging years as told through his written correspondence with family and friends.

Owen (1984) provides a systematic approach to conducting thematic analysis and describes three criteria that must be met in order to constitute a theme in research data. These are: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Recurrence involves finding the same meanings through different language use in a report. Usually meaning is implied, rather than stated directly through the same wording. Recurrence is at the heart of thematic analysis—once it is identified, then the next two criteria may be located. Repetition is an extension of recurrence, but involves the explicit use of the same words, phrases, or sentences. Forcefulness refers to the way in which something is said. In the analysis of typed personal letters, forcefulness is identified through such indicators as italics, boldface, underlining, all capital letters, and punctuation marks, especially exclamation points (Owen, 1984). Due to the nature of my data, I also include any handwritten notations on the typed letters as forcefulness, excluding the signature. Finally, forcefulness is established through how words or sentences appeared on the page in relation to other text. For example, a sentence set apart as its own paragraph and surrounded by other, lengthier paragraphs.

Utilizing thematic analysis in the study of personal letters keeps the analysis grounded in the language used in the letters. Using Owen's (1984) three criteria

permitted salient meanings to emerge from the content of the letters. As modes of interpretation, the themes that surfaced provide insight into the ways in which Grampa makes sense out of, and applies meanings to, himself and the world around him. In this way, a thematic analysis captures the interpretations and meanings that are important to Grampa's reporting of his later years and, taken as a whole, provide insight into how his identity was negotiated and performed through his experiences and interactions over the years. In short, the emergent themes demonstrate what mattered most to Grampa in his later years.

*Procedures.* First, I read the entire collection of letters through from beginning to end, simply reading for content and understanding. During this initial reading, several key concepts quickly became evident (e.g., the predominance of age), but I refrained from making notes or marking in the margins and simply tried to absorb the collection in its entirety.

Next, I conducted a second reading of the letters and, during this reading, created reflective notes in the margins (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These notes consist of comments about recurrent topics and context of those topics. I made occasional notations in the body of the letter (e.g., noting linguistic metaphors). This was the initial phase of coding in which I began to give descriptive labels to recurrent concepts (e.g., age; friends dying). This reading included identifying and marking Owen's (1984) three criteria on the copied letters.

When this second reading was completed, I went through the collection once again using my margin notes and initial coding to create notes in a separate spiral bound

notebook. I created a note for each year and then subsequent memos were created to summarize my initial thoughts and interpretations (Babbie, 2007). Once this was completed, I began creating logs of the codes and their associated recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness, as well as noting identifying instances of each with examples and the corresponding letter number (Smith, 1995). Next, I began identifying the important concepts that were emerging.

At this point, I began utilizing the advanced search function on Adobe Acrobat. This enabled me to enter a search word (e.g., age) and locate each instance of that word within the collection of letters in seconds. This also allowed me to quickly and efficiently identify contextual characteristics and patterns. As part of this process, I began copying and pasting segments of text from the letters, with their accompanying codes, onto a separate Word document; thus creating the logs mentioned above. These logs proved to be invaluable throughout the duration of my analysis.

Throughout these processes, I continued to create notes and memos to help me keep track of emerging connections and interpretations. Using these notes and memos, I began to draft initial written versions of my analysis and subsequent results. Scholars agree that writing is part of the analytic process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). As such, beginning to write up the findings from the thematic analysis further helped me to interpret and analyze the findings. As part of this process, I consulted with peer reviewers in an attempt to further hone and refine my interpretations and shaping of the results (Suter, 2010). I copied and pasted excerpts from the letters into Word documents and then wrote introductory analyses of the excerpts. I shared these with two peer

reviewers. Between them, these peer reviewers were familiar with my theories, my methods, and portions of my data set. I then received written feedback from them or we discussed the data and interpretation in person. From here, I developed rough drafts of my thematic analysis results chapter, shared them with my advisor, and further refined. Initially, my thematic results included seven themes. With guidance from my advisor, I continued to both collapse and expand the themes until I ultimately arrived at the two overarching themes discussed in chapter 3, that of (a) relationality and (b) age & aging.

The thematic analysis of Grampa's letters produced robust results that provide insight into how Grampa negotiated and performed identity in his later years. In addition, the thematic analysis served as the foundation for the second phase of analysis, metaphoric analysis. I discuss the procedures involved in the metaphoric analysis of Grampa's letters below.

**Metaphoric analysis.** The second research question asks: What do the metaphors that emerge from personal letters reveal about the construction of the aging male identity? In order to answer this question, I conducted a metaphoric analysis. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) posit that our conceptual system is metaphorical in nature and that our language is reflective of these metaphorical thought processes. In other words, our everyday talk is indicative of those metaphorical concepts that structure our cognitive schema. As a result, metaphoric analysis has the ability to capture individual psychological constructs that reflect the construction and negotiation of identity.

Conceptual metaphors refer to metaphorical concepts while linguistic metaphors refer to linguistic expressions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For example, in Western

culture, the concept of love is often understood metaphorically in terms of a journey (Lakoff, 1986). The conceptual metaphor, then, is love is a journey. In this metaphor, the target domain, love, is structured in terms of the source domain, journey. In other words, we understand and interpret the more abstract idea of love through an understanding of the more concrete notion of a journey. The language we use reflects and reveals this conceptual metaphor, resulting in linguistic metaphorical expressions such as “our relationship is at a crossroads,” or, “we hit some bumps in the road, but it has been smooth sailing since then.” Stated differently, a linguistic metaphor is a figure of speech and a conceptual metaphor is a figure of thought (Lakoff).

Stemming from his thematic analysis, Owen (1985, 1990) presents a systematic approach to identifying conceptual metaphors. He suggests that metaphors are identified by their manifesting discourse. For example, utilizing Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor, Owen (1985) demonstrates that “war” is a source domain which helps explain the lesser understood target domain of “argument.” These two seemingly disparate terms are linked by manifesting discourse such as “your claims are *indefensible*,” and “he *shot down* all of my arguments.” (Owen, 1985, p. 4). This manifesting discourse is identified through the use of verbs, adjectives and adverbs (Owen). These are active and descriptive words that depict the way in which something is perceived by the person using them. In this way, the manifesting discourse used by Grampa in his letters creates a main conceptual metaphor that aids in understanding his worldview and experiences and speaks to the construction of his later life identity.

Owen (1985) describes three criteria for identifying specific instances of the manifesting discourse that constitutes conceptual metaphors (i.e., figures of thought). These criteria are the same that are used in thematic analysis: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984). The language used in the letters reveals conceptual metaphors that shape my grandfather's thought processes, and consequently, his life. Using the three criteria explained above, metaphoric analysis kept the analysis grounded in the language used in the letters and, importantly, keeps the subjectivity of Grampa at the forefront of research findings. I discuss the specific procedures I followed for this analysis below.

***Procedures.*** The specific steps I took to conduct a metaphoric analysis began with the procedures described above for the thematic analysis and had two foci. I looked for both manifesting discourse that reflected conceptual metaphors, or figures of thought, as well as linguistic metaphorical expressions, or figures of speech, used by Grampa. On my initial read through of the corpus of letters, I noted any instances of linguistic metaphorical expressions. As the analysis progressed, I also began locating manifesting discourse through identification of primarily adverbs and adjectives that met the three criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. The process for both is described below.

As I conducted the initial reading of the letters, I mentally noted any linguistic metaphors that Grampa used in his letters. In a subsequent reading, I underlined those expressions. I then mentioned them in subsequent notes and memos. Next, I created logs of their locations in the letters and included any pertinent contextual information. It

quickly became evident that Grampa rarely used metaphorical expressions, but when he did they were usually in relationship to death and dying.

As the analysis progressed, I also began locating manifesting discourse through identification of adjectives and adverbs that met the three criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. I used the notes, logs, and memos that I created during the thematic analysis to guide my investigation. It quickly became obvious that Grampa used many more positive adjectives to describe his life and experiences than he did negative ones. For example, the word “wonderful” is used 106 times while the word “terrible” is only used 4 times in the collection.

I wrote detailed preliminary analyses and included excerpts from the letters in my initial stages of research. I shared these notes and excerpts with four established scholars in the field of communication who in turn provided invaluable feedback in the beginning stages of this analysis. I submitted a document to them with exemplars from Grampa’s letters and my own initial interpretations and preliminary analyses. Three of the scholars replied back in writing with insightful suggestions and comments. I met with one scholar to discuss her feedback in person. From these comments and suggestions, I continued to interpret and analyze the findings through a process of abstraction in which I continued to identify larger metaphors that brought cohesion to my findings (Suter, et al., 2010). With each new iteration of my findings, I continued to hone and refine the results. This entailed a constant interplay with the data in which I continuously went back to the data to verify my interpretations.



During this process, I also discussed my emerging interpretations with one of the peer reviewers mentioned above who is familiar with the theory, method, and data set for this study. Working with this peer reviewer enabled me to talk through findings and gain different interpretive perspectives (Suter, 2010). The feedback from these reviews was invaluable in continuing to shape my investigation and findings.

As I moved through these processes, I created notes and memos to help me keep track of the data, my thoughts, and emerging connections and interpretations. All of these notes and memos are saved separately from my data in one 5-subject spiral bound notebook and two single subject spiral bound notebooks as well as on my personal computer (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These notes and memos total over 600 pages and were central to beginning the writing of the metaphor results chapter. As with the thematic analysis, the results of the metaphoric analysis are expressed in multiple written iterations. I began by writing rough drafts, printing them, making comments and additions (as a result of looking at the data again and discussions with peer reviewers) and then revising the document once again. This was an ongoing cyclical process that ultimately resulted in the production of Chapter 4.

Both analyses and the writing of Chapter's 3 and 4 are influenced by my relationship with my grandfather and my experiences with and knowledge of family history and the relationships within my family. My meaning-making is intimately intertwined with the family stories, conversations, and artifacts that I have been exposed to throughout my life and also after the death of my grandfather. My interpretations are colored by these family memories as they are engrained in my own thought processes.

As the analyses unfolded, I talked with family members who were able to enhance and refine my interpretations based on their knowledge of my grandfather as well as family history and relationships. In this way, the findings of this study are based on both linguistic analyses and my family knowledge and interactions.

### **Validity**

This study incorporated four specific steps in an effort to address validity concerns. These are primarily adapted from Riessman (2008). First, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the several years that this study spanned. This journal includes my own musings on the unfolding of both of the analyses and my interpretations as well as my personal and emotional reactions to the process. Keeping a journal enabled me to better process the emotional aspects of this project as well as provide a log of the specific steps I took and the decisions I made throughout the analytic process. This was an emotionally and intellectually taxing experience for me and keeping a journal helped me express the myriad of emotions I encountered as well as keep my research objectives in perspective. This allowed me to be reflexive in my interpretations and subsequent analyses.

Second, I have used exemplars in the write-up of my analyses which allows the reader to make connections between the data and the offered analysis. Exemplars provide explicit examples for the reader between the data set and my interpretations (Suter, 2010). In addition, certain words, phrases, or sentences from the letters were utilized in the analyses and discussion that further illustrate for the reader the connections between Grampa's letters and the construction of his aging identity.

Third, I have created an audit trail which includes the letters (both hard and electronic copies) and analysis documents (e.g., notes, memos) involved in this study. An audit trail provides a record of data analysis and procedures that can be provided upon request (Suter, 2010). I have kept all hard documents from this study in labeled manila folders and stored in file boxes in my own personal storage. All electronic copies are kept on an external hard drive. This audit trail will be available upon request.

As mentioned above, the fourth strategy I incorporated to address validity concerns was to utilize peer reviewers (Suter, 2010). Especially given my positionality, this allowed for the perspective of others to aid in my analysis and research findings. I enlisted the help of two colleagues who are familiar with my methods, theory, and data set in an effort to validate what my analysis uncovered. I provided them with written analyses as well as excerpts from Grampa's letters and they either responded in writing or we then discussed it in person. My analysis of Grampa's letters is intricately rooted in my own knowledge of and relationship with my grandfather. As such, the insightful and generous feedback from my peers helped keep the results and interpretations in proper perspective.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I introduce my data set and address the research methods and procedures for this study. The data set for this study is a substantial corpus of personal letters written by my grandfather over the last twenty years of his life. This data set required detailed and specific organizational management and storage in order to proceed with the analysis and the written results. I used two research methods in this study,

thematic and metaphoric analyses. The thematic analysis laid the foundation for the metaphoric analysis and each produced revealing and insightful results through specific systematic procedures. This chapter also includes a review of the four specific steps undertaken to achieve validity in this study. Given the personal nature of this study, it was imperative that I pay close attention to concerns of validity. In sum, this chapter presents the specific methodology undertaken to manage and analyze Grampa's collection of letters.

## **Chapter Three: Thematic Analysis Findings**

### **Chapter Overview**

Themes are recurring patterns that capture the essence of a text (Morse, 2008). These patterns offer insight into the ways in which people understand and conceptualize their lives, relationships, and experiences (Keyton, 2006). A thematic analysis examines the recurrent patterns in a text to unify seemingly disparate ideas and provide an overall understanding behind the meaning of those ideas. The aim, then, of a thematic analysis of Grampa's letters is to understand both the content and the complexity of his lived experience during his aging years as told through his written correspondence with family and friends.

In this chapter, I present the findings from Research Question 1: What themes emerge from the personal letters written by an aging man? In order to answer this question, I utilize Owen's (1984) thematic method which identifies recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness in Grampa's letters. Employing this method allows the analysis to stay grounded in Grampa's own language and the salient topics in his later life to surface. To this end, the chapter reveals what was important to Grampa through explicating the topics he wrote about most often over the last twenty years of his life. With an eye toward the overarching concepts of aging, masculinity, and identity, this chapter highlights significant factors in Grampa's negotiation of his aging male identity.

Two dominant themes emerged from the letters, (a) relationality and (b) age & aging. These are concepts that were so salient in Grampa's life that he wrote about them consistently and continuously throughout the last decades of his life. They demonstrate what was important to Grampa in his later years. The two themes are comprised of sub-themes. Exemplars from the letters are presented in this chapter to illuminate the two overarching themes and their sub-themes. In order to solidify each theme, I offer an analysis using Owen's (1984) three criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness following the presentation and discussion of the exemplars in each theme.

This chapter begins with the theme of relationality. This first theme is about the people in Grampa's life and the value he places on his relationships with these people: his wife, his family, his friends, and his roles within those relationships. It demonstrates his conceptualization of his marriage as a partnership and his desire to honor and celebrate it. This theme also captures Grampa's emphasis on fostering connections between and among family members, and the appreciation he has for the friendships in his life. Finally, this theme reveals the importance Grampa places on the relational roles he holds within those relationships.

### **Relationality**

The theme of relationality exhibits the highly interpersonal nature of Grampa's later life. Through his letters, it is evident that Grampa deeply cares about the people in his life and cultivates relationships with those people. Being in relationship with others is an important aspect of his life, one he finds meaning and value in. Grampa's letters indicate that being in relationships with others is an extremely significant and important

aspect of his later years. He celebrates them, cultivates connections, and expresses appreciation for them as well as taking their attendant roles seriously.

The very existence of the letters is indicative of his desire for connection with others and his commitment to fostering those connections with the people he cares about. The variety of letter recipients includes people Grampa cared deeply about and considered family and friends. The people constituting the relationships in his life are his wife, his family, and his friends. The people he is writing to are also the people he is writing about. In addition to demonstrating relationality through the relationships he is engaged in and refers to throughout his letters, Grampa's relational nature is also highlighted through his explicit reference to relational roles in his letters. He often refers to himself in the third person and makes salient the role he is enacting in relationship to the letter recipient. These relationships and roles will be further explicated below.

**Grampa's Relationship with his Wife.** Perhaps the most salient relationship that surfaces in Grampa's letters is his relationship with his wife, Gramma Sadie. Though none of the letters are written to her, she is a constant presence throughout the corpus of letters as Grampa speaks both about her and on her behalf. He includes her as part of his voice in the letters by using the pronouns "we" and "our" to speak for both of them. These referencing terms are "indicative of great comfort and knowledge of the other person, and symbolize the degree of shared experience and identity within the relationship" (Harwood, 2007, p. 98). In this way, Grampa presents his marriage as a partnership. The letters give the sense that she is a part of him, that they are one entity.

Grampa's use of unifying pronouns to talk about his wife in his letters communicates that his marriage is a partnership that holds tremendous significance and meaning for him.

In addition to evidencing the partnership between he and his wife, Grampa's letters also reveal that his relationship with his wife is enjoyable and one he wants to honor and celebrate. When Grampa makes explicit reference to his marriage, it is often in regard to a wedding anniversary and always with positive affect regarding the marriage and his relationship with his wife. The following two exemplars demonstrate this pattern:

Sadie and I will celebrate our 56th anniversary this summer! It has been a happy, happy union! (2001\_24)

This is the year of our fiftieth wedding anniversary and we want to take the opportunity during the year to visit and have dinner with many friends and relatives with whom we have shared parts of our fun-filled married life. (It seemed impractical and unsatisfactory to accomplish this in one big party; we would never get to visit personally!) (1995\_5)

Both exemplars reference a wedding anniversary and Grampa's positive attitude toward his marriage. In the first exemplar, exclamation points frame the two sentences suggesting that he is emphatic about what he is saying: both that his marriage to his wife has lasted 56 years and that it has been a "happy, happy union!" Grampa states that they will "celebrate" their anniversary which indicates that it is something worth rejoicing in and honoring. In the second sentence, he repeats the word "happy" twice before referring to his marriage as a union. This demonstrates both his positive regard for the marriage



and the fact that he views his relationship as a partnership: he and his wife are inextricably bound.

The second exemplar is from a letter to Grampa's niece, but a version of the sentiment is expressed in several letters to a variety of recipients, all family and friends, from that year. In this second exemplar, Grampa indicates that they want to celebrate the anniversary of their marriage for the entire year. This is indicative of his desire to honor his marriage and celebrate his relationship with his wife. To do this, they spend a full year visiting with all the people who have been important to them and "shared" parts of their marriage. He describes his married life as "fun-filled," further demonstrating that it has been an enjoyable and pleasant experience for him. As the above exemplars reveal, Grampa's relationship with his wife is a partnership that has lasted through the years, been happy, fun, and worth celebrating in a profound way.

The second exemplar also provides a glimpse into the next two sub-themes of relationality. As it indicates, other people shared parts of Grampa's married life. The purpose of the celebratory year is, first and foremost, to honor their marriage; but in addition, its purpose is to commemorate the people who were important to them throughout the years. As revealed in the exemplar, they chose not to have a party so that they could "visit personally" with their family and friends. They spent the year traveling and connecting with these people in close, intimate contexts. This evidences Grampa's desire to connect with people in a way that allows him to share and engage with them on a personal level. As indicated previously, these people are those Grampa considers family and friends. Below, family will be discussed first.

**Grampa's Relationships with Family.** Family is important to Grampa. His family includes his children, grandchildren, sisters, nieces and nephews, cousins, in-laws, and former in-laws. His letters share family history and stories, include updates on family members' health, career, and relationship statuses, and foster family ties, kinkeeping, by encouraging family members to know and stay in touch with one another. He often references family and the importance that relationships with family members hold for him.

Research on men as family kinkeepers is limited and inconclusive; however, Grampa's letters irrefutably construct him as a kinkeeper in his family. The following exemplar demonstrates this pattern. It is taken from a letter to Grampa's youngest grandson and is in regard to an upcoming family reunion that Grampa is encouraging his grandson to attend:

From personal experience, I can advise you (for lifetime consideration) that if we each don't plan and participate in an occasional reunion we will only see distant relatives at funerals when a family member dies. Hope you won't mind my sending a copy of this to your Dad, also, for his contemplation. He and I have each experienced this, in connection with the deaths of his uncle Bob and his maternal grandparents. (2002\_15)

In this exemplar, Grampa explicitly states that he is advising his grandson on family relationships. That specific advice is encouraging participation in family reunions where his grandson might have the opportunity to meet and become acquainted with "distant relatives." Grampa is providing this recommendation based on his own

experience and his understanding of his son's, his grandson's father's, experience. He cites specific relationships they had with people who are now deceased. The exemplar demonstrates Grampa's emphasis on fostering family ties as well as providing relational advice to younger generations. In parenthetical notation, he adds that this advice is "for lifetime consideration," meaning that he hopes his grandson, age 20 at the time, will carry it with him into his adulthood and later years. It is Grampa's hope that he will inspire his grandson to cultivate his own relationships with family as his life continues to develop. In addition, Grampa indicates that he is sending the letter to his son, his grandson's father, for his "contemplation." This does two things: first, it indicates that Grampa is also indirectly providing kinkeeping advice to his son who will someday take over the family patriarch position. Second, it encourages both son and grandson to talk about Grampa's letter and the significance behind the advice contained therein.

Grampa's own relationships with his family, and relationships between and among his family members, are of utmost importance to Grampa as demonstrated through his letters. Socioemotional selectivity theory suggests that there may be a decrease in social networks as people age but an increase in the intimacy of the remaining relationships (Carstensen, Issacowitz, & Charles, 1999). The remaining relationships tend to be with spouses, family and friends. As demonstrated thus far, Grampa's relationships with his wife and family held significance for him and he fostered them through letters. In addition, Grampa's letters also evidence the significance of the relationships Grampa has with his friends. In his later years, Grampa's social network includes many friendships, most of which were decades long and even lifelong.

**Grampa's Relationships with Friends.** Friendships are clearly significant in Grampa's life. The majority of Grampa's friendships are longstanding. A few date back to Grampa's childhood and were formed through family friends of his parents. Many of his friendships were established in high school, college, and law school and continued throughout Grampa's life. In his letters, he refers to friends and friendships with adjectives like "old" and "dear." The vast number of his letters that were written to friends evidences the fact that Grampa put great effort into maintaining these relationships well into his final years. The following exemplars demonstrate the importance he places on friends and friendship. The first exemplar is the last sentence in a letter sent to multiple longtime friends of Grampa and Gramma's informing them of the death of Grampa's mother-in-law. The second exemplar was written to a college friend of Grampa's on that friend's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday:

Your friendship means a lot to Sadie and me! (1998\_1)

It has been a privilege to have shared over one-half of your lifetime with you, as a friend and associate, and I count it a pleasant prospect to continue our friendship in the years remaining to us. (1998\_14)

The above exemplars demonstrate that Grampa values the friendships in his life and that his friendships held meaning for him. He explicitly states to several friends, "Your friendship means a lot to Sadie and me!" Not only does he speak on behalf of his wife in this exemplar which further demonstrates the pattern of presenting his marriage as a union, he expresses the value, or meaning, that those friendships hold. In the second exemplar, he states that it is a "privilege" to have shared over half of his friend's life and

considers it a “pleasant prospect” to contemplate a continued friendship in the time the two friends have remaining to them. Given Grampa and his friend’s age, this statement reveals Grampa’s desire to remain friends, and his prospective enjoyment of that friendship, until their deaths.

The last letter in Grampa’s collection serves as a profound example of the importance of friendship in his later years. Just two years before his death, Grampa dictated a letter to several close friends explaining his lack of communication as the result of his deteriorating health. He closes the letter with the statement, “We think of you often and hope you are ok.” This is likely the last communication he had with many of those friends. At the end of his life, and in many cases, after decades of friendship, Grampa wants his friends to know that he thinks of them and wishes them well. It is a final farewell from Grampa that concludes a lifetime of written correspondence.

The above explication of sub-themes examines Grampa’s relationships with his wife, his family, and his friends. The exemplars and discussion demonstrate that these relationships are a salient part of Grampa’s aging identity. In addition to talking about relationships, Grampa also refers to his specific roles within those relationships. This is further evidence of the importance of relationality in his later years. For Grampa, it’s not just the relationships that are important to him, but also the accompanying roles that he is fulfilling within those relationships. Below, this sub-theme will be discussed.

**Grampa’s Relational Roles.** Relational roles surface as integral to Grampa’s negotiation of relationships in his letters. Grampa often refers to himself in the third person and explicitly states his role in relationship to his letter recipients. By stating his

role(s), he underscores the importance of power structures and relational processes (Tracy, 2002). He is commenting on the connection between him and the recipient which implies various social and behavioral scripts. It may serve to explain why he is saying certain things or taking particular perspectives. It reminds the letter recipient of the role Grampa plays in that person's life and implies that Grampa takes his role and the relationship seriously.

Grampa refers to his own role in many signature lines. At the end of these letters, he not only articulates his specific role, he also includes a descriptive adjective preceding the role that is relevant to the content of the letter. Below, this is demonstrated in the first exemplar taken from a letter written to his two sisters in which Grampa reflected on college football games they attended as a family in Grampa's younger years.

Your reminiscent brother John, (2003\_1)

In this exemplar, Grampa is remarking not only on his role as "brother," but also what kind of brother he is in this particular letter: "reminiscent." By stating this, he is communicating that he is looking back on times they shared as a family. The term "reminiscent" suggests a degree of longing and wistfulness of days gone by. It is also noteworthy that he states his name, "John" at the end of his role. Grampa is their only brother, so there wouldn't be any confusion as to which brother is writing the letter to them. Referring to himself as "brother John" undoubtedly holds particular meaning for Grampa just as it likely invokes certain memories and feelings in the minds of his sisters when they read that signature line.

Though Grampa's reference to his relational role often occurs in the signature lines of his letters, these references are not relegated solely to the end of his letters. He also includes role references in the body of letters. The second exemplar is written to Grampa's nephew who Grampa had not been in communication with for almost a decade, since his nephew had distanced himself from the family:

Haven't seen you since your Dad's funeral, but I hope you remember your Uncle John. (2001\_39)

In this exemplar, Grampa starts the letter by invoking his relational role. He reminds his nephew that they last saw each other at his nephew's dad's funeral, who was Grampa's brother-in-law. This immediately establishes a family connection between Grampa and his nephew. He then continues on to say that he hopes his nephew "remembers" his "Uncle John." Stating his role in this way underscores the point that he and his nephew have a familial tie that is important to Grampa, and that Grampa hasn't forgotten about it nor does he take it lightly. It implies a bond between the two that time and distance cannot break. It is clearly important to Grampa that his nephew be cognizant of this family tie and the significance it holds for Grampa. In both exemplars, the invocation of Grampa's specific role(s) reminds the letter recipients of not only who Grampa is in relationship to them, but also the value that Grampa places on these roles and his sense of duty in fulfilling them.

The above explication of relationality as a theme demonstrates the importance that people hold in Grampa's life. He values the relationships in his life and the specific roles he fulfills within those relationships. As evidenced, Grampa views his marriage as

a partnership that is worth celebrating, he desires to foster connections between and among family members, and he appreciates, values and finds meaning in his friendships. In addition, he takes his specific relational roles seriously and invokes those roles within his letters to imply certain power structures and relational processes. The theme of relationality will be further developed below by analyzing the exemplars according to Owen's (1984) three linguistic criteria.

**Recurrence, Repetition, and Forcefulness.** To fully develop the theme of relationality, below I analyze the exemplars utilized above according to Owen's (1984) three linguistic criteria; recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. I chose this method in order to ensure that the findings of this analysis remain rooted in Grampa's language. Because the patterns run throughout the collection of letters, it is not always possible to find evidence of the three criteria in each independent exemplar. However, when taken together, the exemplars demonstrate the linguistic patterns that emerge throughout Grampa's letters.

Evidence of Owen's (1984) three criteria is displayed throughout the above exemplars. Recurrence—the same thread of meaning—is indicated in Grampa's use of the words “celebrate,” and “privilege,” as well as the phrases “pleasant prospect,” and “means a lot,” to describe how he feels about his family and his friendships. His relationships are valuable, enjoyable, and worth celebrating. He also refers to sharing “over one-half” of a lifetime with a friend and the many people who “have shared parts” of his 50 year marriage. This reveals the multiplicity and longevity of the relationships in his life.



Repetition—literal re-use of the same wording—is exhibited through Grampa’s use of “we” and “our” three times to include his wife in his statements, or to speak on her behalf. He speaks of “family” and “relatives” and twice refers to himself in terms of his familial role (“Brother” and “Uncle.”). “Friends” and “friendship” are also stated twice in the above exemplars. In addition, “happy,” “share,” “fun,” and “visit” are each repeated twice in reference to experiences and time spent with his wife, his family, and his friends.

Forcefulness—or the emphasis that is placed on certain words or phrases—is established through the use of exclamation points. Exclamation points are utilized in half of the above exemplars and suggest an energetic and emphatic delivery of those messages that precede this punctuation. First, Grampa indicates that he and his wife will be celebrating their “56th anniversary...!” and that his marriage has been a “happy, happy union!” Second, Grampa wants to be able to “visit personally!” with family and friends, indicating the importance that having a connection fostered in person with people has for him. Third, his expression to several friends that their “friendship means a lot to Sadie and me!” clearly indicates that, though the words are few, the sentiment is extremely sincere and heartfelt.

The above discussion and analysis reveal that being in relationships with people is highly valued by Grampa. His wife, his family, his friends, and the accompanying relational roles he fulfills in those relationships all surface as salient in his later years. As will be demonstrated, this theme and its constituent parts will continue to be developed

throughout the remainder of this chapter which discusses another significant aspect of Grampa's later years as revealed in his letters: age & aging.

### **Age & Aging**

Age and the process of aging emerge as highly prominent topics in Grampa's letters. Age is expressed as the chronological number of years old that Grampa is in his letters. Aging is the process of growing older, or accumulating those years. Together, both his age and his aging process hold extreme significance in letters written in Grampa's later years. He refers to these concepts in conjunction with other aspects of his life: health, death, self-expression and time. I develop this theme below through a presentation of sub-themes and their relevant exemplars.

In his letters, Grampa discusses his specific age, or the chronological number of years he has been alive. He proudly announces his age as though it is an accomplishment, or a goal that he has achieved. Words like "attained" and "reached" precede the declaration of age, suggesting that he has been working his whole life to achieve older age. In a letter to his mother-in-law thanking her for a birthday gift she sent him, he writes:

Can you believe I reached the age of 71 years? I can't, but I guess it is true, since I was born in 1919. (1990\_9)

This statement reveals a sense of awe, wonder, and disbelief that he has lived so many years. Grampa's father died at the age of 56 when Grampa was in his early twenties. Gramma Sadie told me that Grampa always believed he too would die in middle age. As a result, the fact that he lived through middle age and well into older age

is an achievement. It is something that he didn't think would happen and he is surprised by and takes pride in the fact that it has.

In addition to finding a sense of accomplishment in his chronological age, Grampa also indicates that his age distinguishes him as old and that he finds it enjoyable. He has a positive outlook on his older age and makes statements that reflect a cheerful disposition about it. He uses words such as "fun," "wonderful," and "pleasant," to describe experiences and relationships he is having in his later years. The following exemplar is taken from a letter written to two of Grampa's law school friends and is in reference to comments his mother-in-law made to him about growing old:

She can't quite comprehend that I'm already "old", I guess, at 74, although I'm finding it a lot of fun. Sadie, now 70 (!), feels the same way as I do about that.  
(1993\_8)

This exemplar reveals that Grampa describes himself as old, at age 74. "Old" is in quotes which suggests that he is defining himself old according to society's standards, but not necessarily his own. The reviewed literature suggests that societal perceptions hold that being old is a negative phenomenon but, in contrast, Grampa finds it "a lot of fun." In addition, his wife would also likely be considered old at "70 (!)" but she too is finding it fun. Not only does this exemplar demonstrate that, for Grampa, "old" is "fun," it further establishes the partnership between Grampa and his wife. He speaks to how she feels about being "old," and indicates that she feels the same way Grampa does. Again, they are presented as one entity with the same feelings and perspectives.

While Grampa is finding older age to be a primarily pleasant and enjoyable experience, his letters also remark on a less enjoyable aspect of aging: health problems. Below, the sub-theme of health is revealed as a pattern that Grampa relates to age & aging.

**Health.** Age serves as a social marker for where a person is in the lifecycle and, therefore, the aging process. As established in the literature review, the process of aging brings health issues that result in the decline and loss of various abilities. In many of his letters, Grampa talks about age & aging in conjunction with his own health and that of his wife. For Grampa, it is not just about his health, but also the health of his wife that is important. In a letter to a generational contemporary and longtime friend, Grampa, age 77 at the time, writes:

Sadie and I are coping successfully so far with the various physical and medical problems associated with the aging process. (1996\_8)

This exemplar refers to the general problems that come with getting older. Grampa, age 77 at the time, states that he and Gramma Sadie are “coping successfully” with these “physical and medical problems.” This statement reveals that the problems they may have been experiencing as a result of the “aging process” are under control and not significantly impacting their life “so far.” This also suggests that he is cognizant of the fact that they may become significant in the future. There is a sense of accomplishment that he and his wife have been able to manage the health issues that have arisen for them. However, as Grampa’s age progresses, he does begin to suffer the decline and loss of abilities associated with aging.

For Grampa, the deterioration of his health was most significant in his physical mobility, primarily his ability to walk. Because of a rare neurological disorder, Grampa's aging and decline was more pronounced and evident than that of his wife. He continues to include his wife in general statements about age, aging, and health, but then speaks of his own personal decline. His letters detail the physical decline he experiences, sometimes in great length. The following exemplar evidences this deterioration. It is taken from a letter to a former in-law and generational contemporary of Grampa's and describes his need for devices that provide him with mobility:

We think you will agree with us that we are finally getting (or have gotten) old, old, old. So far we both think and are confident that you do also that "it's better than the alternative" as the old saying goes. Like you, I can't walk without a walker, except for an occasional two or three steps with a walking stick. I have acquired an electric scooter which is nimble enough to navigate the hallways and, with careful steering, negotiate the inside doors of our old fashioned house.

(2007\_5)

Fourteen years before this exemplar was written, Grampa had distinguished himself as old by societal standards. In the above exemplar, Grampa, age 88, expresses his feeling that he and Gramma Sadie are now "old, old, old" by his own standards. Again, he includes his wife as part of his voice through the pronoun "we." He then goes on to describe his own personal decline and his reliance on devices that help him get around given his deteriorating physical health. He states these things in a direct, matter of fact manner which suggests an acceptance of his situation. He also states that "it's

better than the alternative,” which reveals that both he and his wife are consciously aware of death, the alternative to aging, or being old. It also reveals that, though Grampa is experiencing physical decline, he is still happy to be alive.

The above exemplar demonstrates that Grampa is cognizant that the “alternative” to aging is death. He accepts his deterioration because he knows that dying is the only other option available to him. In Western culture, death is an uncomfortable topic that most people don’t like talking about, or even acknowledging. However, despite its negative associations, death is a natural part of life that we will all face someday. Grampa’s letters deal with death accordingly.

**Death.** Death is a recurrent pattern in Grampa’s letters and often referenced in relationship to age & aging. Death brings an end to the aging process. Grampa’s letters indicate that he is both aware of this and practical about it. For Grampa, death is an ever present reality in his later years. In his letters, he comments on his own death and on the deaths of his generational colleagues and friends. The following excerpt is taken from a letter written to Grampa’s former son-in-law and exemplifies this pattern of referring to his own and others’ deaths:

We’re very conscious, at our ages, of the mortality factors (reinforced by attending funerals of our contemporaries,) and the possibilities/probabilities of future physical ailments and disabilities. So we are trying to do as much as we can of the activities that require a certain amount of physical ability (boating, travel) before those activities are no longer feasible. (2001\_37)

In this excerpt, Grampa, age 82, remarks on his awareness of his own mortality and that of his wife. Again, they are presented as one unit with the same thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Their ages, combined with the deaths of their contemporaries, causes them to contemplate their own eventual death. Trained as an estate attorney, Grampa spent his career preparing for the demise of his clients. This provided him with a pragmatic view of death, including his own. This exemplar expands on his practical view of the aging process, the problems that this process entails, and the inevitable end of the process. As a result of this knowledge and awareness, Grampa and Gramma are trying to live their lives as fully as possible by doing the things they enjoy while they still can.

Grampa indicates that the awareness of “mortality factors” encourages them to continue activities that they enjoy while they are still able to do so. In this way, age, aging, and death have become motivating factors in Grampa’s later years. In addition to motivating Grampa to live life fully and enjoy it as much as possible, these factors also motivate him to express himself to the people he cares about.

**Self-Expression.** As indicated previously, aging research suggests that men become more emotionally expressive as they age. In the explication of the theme of relationality, it became evident that Grampa openly expressed his emotions in letters to his family and friends. This sub-theme of self-expression captures that pattern but expands it from the expression of emotion to encompass the expression of Grampa’s thoughts and opinions as well. Grampa’s letters indicate that, in light of his age, aging process, and the recognition of his eventual death, Grampa is motivated to share his thoughts and feelings with the people in his life. It is important to him that the people he

cares about know how he feels and what he thinks. The following excerpt, taken from a letter to a friend, demonstrates this pattern:

The older I have gotten, the more I have realized how important it is to express your thoughts to friends and family when you think of them and not wait... There, I've said it and I won't have to worry on my deathbed about not having done so!

(2001\_52)

This exemplar was written to a mutual friend after that friend had helped a close friend of Grampa's through an illness that led to his death. In it, Grampa includes a lengthy proclamation of his gratitude for and opinion of the mutual friend's presence and friendship during that illness and subsequent death. I did not include the full excerpt here because of its length and its reference to names and situations that would require detailed description and prove to be irrelevant to the current discussion. Grampa's age and his aging process provide the motivation to tell his family and friends what he thinks and feels. He finds it important to "express" his "thoughts to friends and family" and does so in his letters. He does not want to have any regrets on his "deathbed."

Grampa's age and his aging process provide him with a different perspective as he ages. He recognizes the finite nature of time and that his opportunities to share the thoughts and feelings that are important to him are limited. This perspective on time also puts Grampa in a unique position from which to look back on his life. In addition, as established in this chapter, Grampa has an optimistic view on life and aging and, as a result, his aging also affords him a unique perspective on his future. Below, these are discussed under the sub-theme of time.



**Time.** Time is related to age & aging in that Grampa is in a unique position to both look back in time and look forward in time. His older age provides him with perspective from which he can look back on the people and events in his life. In his letters he shares reflections and memories of people, places, and experiences that he has had over the course of his life. The following exemplar was written in a letter to me in response to a memory book I had given him for Christmas. In it, Grampa summarizes what he reflects on when he is looking back on his life:

I have not entered anything in the memory book yet, but it has certainly inspired a good deal of reflection. My thoughts haven't quite crystallized and sorted themselves out, yet. I seem to think a lot more about our (and my) adventures than about my career; which must validate the decisions to have fun along the way, I guess. Clearly, the most valued and appreciated part of my life and experiences involve the family! Family and fun are closely associated, also; isn't that nice? Of course, the awesome part of it all has been the observing and experiencing of the last 65 or so years of world history; the years I can remember about those things. (1996\_2)

This exemplar demonstrates what Grampa finds important as he looks back upon his life. The gift of a memory book causes him to reflect on his past and consider what he values and thinks about most. It suggests that “family and fun” are “closely associated” and highly valued by Grampa. His “adventures” refer to the extensive traveling that he did throughout his life, which he found “fun” and enjoyable. He states that his family is “clearly” the “most valued and appreciated” part of his life. The word

“clearly” suggests that to know Grampa is to know this about him—that his family is of utmost importance in his life. In addition, “observing and experiencing” over six decades of world history has been awe-inspiring for him. This suggests that Grampa’s years on earth have provided him with humility and gratitude regarding his place in the grand scheme of things. While his age & aging process place Grampa in a unique position to look back on his life, Grampa’s letters also reveal a sense of anticipation, or looking forward to the future.

Though Grampa is nearing the end of his life, he still looks forward to the life he has left. In many letters he talks about looking forward and anticipating things to come in the future. These things include relationships, travels, and various experiences. The things that matter most to him, as exemplified above, are also the things he looks forward to continuing to enjoy. The following exemplar was written to a longtime friend and generational contemporary of Grampa’s and evidences his anticipation for the future:

I recognize that our future seems much more finite and time-limited than it did in our youth. Nevertheless, I am confident that you, as well as I, have a number of "good years" ahead and I urge you (as I am myself dedicated!) to make good use of them for the benefit of our families, friends and communities, as well as for our personal enjoyment. (1998\_14)

Though it may seem counterintuitive to be considered old and looking forward to the years ahead, the above exemplar demonstrates that Grampa was indeed doing just that. He is aware that his remaining years may be limited, but he does not see his life as over. Rather, he has a practical view of the “finite and time-limited” nature of his

“future” and is “dedicated!” to making “good use” of that that time for the “benefit” of others, again evidencing the importance of people in Grampa’s life. In addition, enjoying life once again surfaces as salient for Grampa. Part of making his remaining years “good” is having fun and finding enjoyment in the relationships and experiences in his life.

The above explication of age & aging as a theme demonstrates the salience of these topics in Grampa’s later years. His age and his aging process are connected to discussions of the accomplishment and enjoyment of old age, the general and specific health problems that are associated with the aging process, the inevitable presence of death, motivation for self-expression, and a unique perspective on time. To conclude this theme, below I analyze the above exemplars according to Owen’s (1984) three criteria.

**Recurrence, Repetition, and Forcefulness.** As with the theme of relationality, an analysis of the exemplars from the theme of age & aging according to Owen’s (1984) recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness is presented to demonstrate the linguistic evidence of the above themes and sub-themes.

Recurrence is evidenced through Grampa’s repeated use of the words “age,” and “old,” to describe his location in the lifecycle. He often refers to his age in terms of chronological “years.” He talks about health in terms of “problems” physical “ailments” and the loss of “abilities” as he experiences deterioration in his ability to walk on his own and needs devices that help him “navigate” and “negotiate.” The topic of death recurs through words such as “mortality,” “funerals,” and “deathbed” in addition to the notion of time being “finite,” and limited for him.

Repetition is also established with the words “age,” used three times, and “old,” used five times, as well as the number of “years,” stated three times to describe chronological age. “Years” is also repeated twice to refer to both looking forward and looking back. “Future” is also repeated twice in terms of looking forward. “Physical” and “ability” are also repeated twice in reference to health. Used three times, “fun” evidences his enjoyment of life in his later years. Finally, “family” is repeated three times and “friends” twice to further substantiate the importance of relationships.

Forcefulness is established through the underlining of 1919, the year Grampa was born, in the first exemplar. Also, Grampa’s use of the word “old” repeated three times in immediate succession is another form of forcefulness as it denotes an ardent belief that he is not just old, he is really old. In addition, exclamation points are utilized in half of the above exemplars and suggest an energetic and emphatic delivery of those messages. The first instance sets the exclamation point within parentheses following Gramma Sadie’s age: “70 (!)” and suggests a sense of astonishment that she, too, is old at that age. Second, Grampa suggests that expressing his thoughts and feelings will relieve him from “worry on my deathbed about not having done so!” indicating that this is a great relief to him. The third instance, as mentioned in the relationality section of this chapter, includes an exclamation point after Grampa states that family is the most valued part of his life. The final instance of an exclamation point occurs when Grampa states that he is “dedicated!” to making good use of the years he has remaining to him.

## **Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter presented the thematic analysis results in answer to Research

Question 1: What themes emerge from the personal letters written by an aging man?

Two overarching themes emerged: relationality and age & aging. Each of these themes is demonstrated through an explication of their sub-themes, discussion of the exemplars presented, and evidence of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Thematic analysis captured those concepts that are relevant and salient to Grampa in his later years and provides insight into how his aging identity was negotiated and performed. In short, the themes explicated in this chapter demonstrate what mattered most to Grampa.

## **Chapter Four: Metaphoric Chapter Findings**

### **Chapter Overview**

Contemporary theory on metaphor posits that metaphors are more than simply linguistic expressions. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that our conceptual system is metaphorical in nature and that our language reflects these metaphorical thought processes. As a result, metaphoric analysis has the ability to capture the cognitive constructs that frame Grampa's later life experiences and, thus, reflects the negotiation and performance of his identity. In this chapter, I present the findings from Research Question 2: What do the metaphors that emerge from personal letters reveal about the construction of an aging male identity? To answer this question, I discuss both conceptual metaphors (i.e., figures of thought) and linguistic metaphors (i.e., figures of speech) as they emerge in Grampa's letters.

This chapter begins by highlighting two metaphorical concepts, or figures of thought, that emerged from Grampa's letters regarding aging: (a) aging is a tolerable inconvenience and (b) aging is a blessing of time. In both of these metaphors, aging is the target domain with tolerable inconvenience and blessing of time being the source domains, respectively. In other words, Grampa understood aging as both a tolerable inconvenience and a blessing of time. In the second part of the chapter, I examine the linguistic metaphors, or figures of speech, that Grampa utilizes in his letters. Throughout the collection, these expressions predominantly refer to death and suggest that Grampa

understood death through metaphor. Across this chapter, I present exemplars from the letters to evidence both the conceptual and linguistic metaphors that emerge and then provide an analysis and extrapolation of the manifesting discourse for each. I begin with the first conceptual metaphor that aging is a tolerable inconvenience.

### **Aging is a Tolerable Inconvenience**

The metaphor that aging is a tolerable inconvenience is manifested in the different ways Grampa talks about aging throughout his collection of letters. His language indicates that he finds aging to be both positive and negative—he talks about aging as being enjoyable, but also about the loss that it entails. These positive and negative aspects balance each other out and make the process of aging, for Grampa, a tolerable inconvenience. It is something that is somewhat bothersome but can be dealt with as necessary. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980) “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (p. 5). In this way, aging is understood as a tolerable inconvenience. Though “tolerable inconvenience” is a descriptive phrase, it captures the essence of Grampa’s understanding and experience of growing old in his own words.

In this section, I articulate this metaphor in terms of the positive aspects of aging that Grampa’s letters reveal (i.e., fun and enjoyment) as well as the negative aspects that are revealed (i.e., loss of abilities and friends). I present exemplars for each aspect of aging as Grampa discusses them and unpack those exemplars to expose deeper meanings. The section concludes with a detailed examination of the manifesting discourse of this metaphor according to Owen’s (1984, 1985) method.

The idea that aging is a tolerable inconvenience emerges as a conceptual metaphor directly from Grampa's use of the descriptive phrase, "tolerable inconvenience," to describe aging in one of his letters in response to advice his mother-in-law often gave him about growing old. This advice is referenced in several letters as a way of contrasting his own experiences of growing old. This first exemplar is taken from a letter written to long-time friends of Grampa's and references his mother-in-law's advice as well as Grampa's thoughts about it:

Sadie's mother is almost 93, living in a retirement home in Clearwater, Florida, and her constant admonition to her beloved son-in-law is: 'Don't get old, John, it's no fun.' However, I have found it a tolerable inconvenience, so far, and have not been tempted to the only alternative thus far known to modern science!

(1993\_1)

In this first exemplar, Grampa, age 74 at the time, describes getting "old" as a "tolerable inconvenience." This is in contrast to the oft used "admonition" from his mother-in-law not to "get old" because "it's no fun." This saying of his mother-in-law's is referenced in several letters in his collection, indicating that it was a salient and significant message for Grampa. Aging being "no fun" is a common cultural conception as well as his mother-in-law's constant quip. "However," Grampa continues on to say, he finds it bearable and is not "tempted to the only alternative thus far known to modern science!" In other words, he prefers aging to death. He recognizes that death is the only other option to him and, "so far," it is not an option he desires. "So far" indicates that, at least thus far, Grampa prefers life, and subsequently, aging. This is because he still found



that life had quality even though it also had drawbacks. This exemplar, in Grampa's own words, introduces the metaphorical concept of aging as a tolerable inconvenience as revealed through Grampa's letters. This metaphor is invoked throughout all of his letters through manifesting discourse that describes aging as both enjoyment and loss, or as both tolerable and inconvenient.

**Aging is tolerable.** Tolerable means that something is bearable, acceptable, or sufficient—it is good enough. For Grampa, aging is tolerable for several reasons. He perceives older age as an accomplishment. In his letters he refers to “reaching,” or “attaining” certain ages. For example, in one letter he writes, “Can you believe I reached the age of 71 years?” (1990\_9). Grampa's father died in his mid-fifties and, according to Gramma Sadie, Grampa often expressed concern that he would also die before he reached old age. Therefore, he finds that living into old age is an accomplishment—a goal that has been achieved. It is something that he has desired most of his life. In addition to perceiving aging as an accomplishment, he finds aging “fun.” The next two exemplars demonstrate this sense of enjoyment and accomplishment that emerges from Grampa's letters. The first exemplar is in reference to the abovementioned admonition from Grampa's mother-in-law regarding growing old. It is in a different letter than the one cited previously and is written to his two closest friends from law school:

She can't quite comprehend that I'm already "old", I guess, at 74, although I'm finding it a lot of fun. Sadie, now 70 (!), feels the same way as I do about that.  
(1993\_8)

Ten years later, Grampa writes to his oldest grandson:

I'm 84 years old this year and Gramma reached 80. We talk many times about how wonderful it is to still be alive and enjoying our family, friends and the things we still are able to enjoy doing! (2003\_27)

These two exemplars are evidence of Grampa's enjoyment of older age. First, he establishes himself as "old" at the age of "74." The quotes around "old" and his use of the phrase "I guess," afterward indicate that he is reluctantly defining himself as old, likely because societal standards would describe him that way as a result of his chronological age. "Although," in contrast to societal conceptions as well as his mother-in-law's, he finds it "a lot of fun." His wife, Gramma Sadie, would also be considered old by society's standards at the age of "70(!)" but she, too, finds it fun. In other words, both Grampa and his wife disagree with the commonly held belief that aging is an entirely negative phenomenon. The exclamation point after Gramma Sadie's age suggests that Grampa is implying that she is considered old also even though she is four years younger than him. It also communicates the sense of accomplishment that Grampa attaches to older age. It is as though he is saying, "Wow! Sadie has reached the age of 70!"

Ten years later, when Grampa is 84 and Gramma has "reached 80," Grampa states that they find it "wonderful" to "still be alive" and "enjoying" things. He states that they "talk many times" about their situation which indicates that it is something they were both conscious of and grateful for in their daily lives. The word "still" is used twice and suggests that Grampa is cognizant of the fact that their situation could be different—they could be in such poor health that they would not be "able" to "enjoy" things, or one or

both of them could no longer be living. The things they enjoy doing include spending time with “family and friends” as well as traveling, community involvement, reading, and enjoying nature. For Grampa, the fact that both of them are “alive” and in decent health and, therefore, “able” to “still” do these things is “wonderful.” Put differently, Grampa enjoys life and is adapting to the aging process.

The two excerpts above exemplify the pattern of enjoyment of aging that emerges from Grampa’s letters. This pattern indicates that he finds aspects of aging to be positive—it is fun, wonderful, and enjoyable. He is able to spend time with family and friends and do the things that bring him pleasure. However, his letters also reveal that he experienced negative aspects of aging—namely in terms of loss. It is this sense of loss that Grampa finds inconvenient.

**Aging is inconvenient.** If something is inconvenient, it is untimely, inopportune, or otherwise bothersome. Aging is inconvenient for Grampa because it is about loss of his abilities, faculties, and friends. Grampa refers to these losses throughout his letters and in a variety of ways. He unabashedly discusses his loss of both physical and mental abilities, though his discussion of his physical decline is more prevalent than that of his mental decline. At age 83, Grampa was diagnosed with a rare neurological disease that resulted in the gradual deterioration of his physical abilities and would lead, eight years later, to his death. Grampa describes this physical decline, often in painstaking detail, in his letters. He describes the falls he took as a result of losing control of his legs and the subsequent concussions, stitches, broken bones, and various bumps and bruises that he incurred. (e.g., “Now, since everyone our ages is bound to discuss health first, I shall

report that while Sadie and I were in Louisville attending a boat show...I had a fall, concussion and partial facial fracture.” (2001\_34). After this opening sentence, Grampa goes on to describe the circumstances of the fall, his hospital stay, and the longer term consequences of the fall (e.g., not being able to drive for a period of time).

In addition to describing his physical decline, Grampa also refers to the loss of his mental faculties as well as the deaths of his friends and generational contemporaries in his letters. He refers to his mental decline in much less detail than he describes his loss of physical abilities. He usually makes a statement, in a sentence or two, that serves as an explanation or apology for some kind of error or breach on his part (e.g., “My aging brain doesn't function too well after being up all night.” (1989\_2). Though he does not provide significant detail about this mental decline, references to it are recurrent throughout the collection of letters.

Also throughout the corpus, but especially in the latter years of the collection, Grampa speaks of the deaths of his friends and contemporaries. Many letters in his collection are condolence letters written to the spouse or children of someone who died. He also writes letters in order to inform recipients about the deaths of relatives and friends, and includes descriptions of his travels to and attendance at the funerals of these individuals. He comments on the extent of these losses in many of his letters (e.g., “Our contemporaries seem to be dropping off like flies!” (2001\_34). The following four exemplars demonstrate all of these patterns of loss that Grampa experiences throughout the latter decades of his life. The next two exemplars evidence Grampa's references to

his physical decline. The first was written to a longtime friend of Grampa's who he hadn't been in contact with for a couple of years:

My health is deteriorating a bit and it is difficult for me to walk and keep my balance. (2006\_5)

Over a year later Grampa writes the following to old childhood friends:

(D)uring the past six months my walking ability has reduced to zilch. (2007\_8)

The next exemplar is taken from a letter written to friends and demonstrates his references to the decline of his mental faculties. He uses it as an introductory sentence to asking the recipient for information that Grampa knows the recipient has already given him. Grampa was 82 years old at the writing of this letter:

My memory deteriorates slowly but steadily in my geriatric years. (2001\_21)

Finally, the following exemplar evidences the extensive loss of friends that Grampa is experiencing. It is from a letter written to me, Grampa's children, and his two sisters and informs on the death of a longtime friend and business associate of Grampa's. This sentence is its own paragraph and follows the explanation of his friend's death:

The list of living "good old friends" is shrinking still further. (2001\_3)

Taken together, these exemplars illuminate the significant amount of loss that Grampa experiences in his later years. He loses his ability to walk, suffers from memory loss and decline in brain function, and mourns the deaths of friends and contemporaries. He uses the word "deteriorate" to describe the condition of both his physical and mental abilities. First, he states that his "health is deteriorating" and it is "difficult" to "walk." Then, his "walking ability has reduced to zilch." The deterioration of his "memory" is

“slow” but “steady” as his aging process progresses. These statements reveal a gradual decline in terms of both physical and mental abilities which inevitably impacts his ability to do those things that he enjoys doing in his older age (e.g., In one letter to friends he describes as traveling companions, he writes: “One of the inconveniences of aging, I am discovering, is loss of mobility to travel comfortably and safely.” (2006\_20))

In addition to his loss of abilities, the loss of friends is an ongoing phenomenon in Grampa’s aging years. Grampa was in written correspondence with a substantial amount of people that he considered good friends—whether from childhood, college or law school days, or friendships developed over the course of his career. Over the last two decades of his life, he experienced the deaths of many of them. In other words, his “list of living” friends is “shrinking still further” as time goes on. This sentence calls to mind a written list on which names continue to be deleted. The “list” of friends who are still alive grows shorter and shorter as he ages. The tone of the letter from which this excerpt is taken is somewhat melancholy, an unusual tone in Grampa’s letters. The above excerpt, visually set apart in the letter in which it was written, captures this tone and expresses his sadness at the death of not only the friend to which he is specifically referring in this particular letter, but also the deaths of all of the friends who he has lost over the years.

Thus far this chapter has articulated the conceptual metaphor of aging as a tolerable inconvenience in terms of the positive aspects of aging that Grampa’s letters reveal (i.e., fun and enjoyment) as well as the negative aspects that are revealed (i.e., loss of abilities and friends). I presented exemplars for each aspect of aging as Grampa

discusses them and unpacked those exemplars to expose deeper meanings. I now turn to a detailed description of the manifesting discourse that constitutes this metaphorical concept.

**Manifesting Discourse.** To sufficiently develop the emergent metaphor of aging as a tolerable inconvenience, the discussion below analyzes the exemplars presented above by identifying Owen's (1984, 1985) three criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. I chose Owen's method of metaphoric analysis in order to ensure that the findings of this analysis remain rooted in Grampa's language. Recurrence in language is the same thread of meaning, articulated in different words, while repetition is the use of the same words multiple times. Forcefulness involves the emphasis with which something is said (e.g., underlining, exclamation points). Below, I analyze Grampa's language according to these specific criteria as a means of further establishing the manifestation of the metaphor aging is a tolerable inconvenience. First, I establish aging as the target domain as it is revealed through the identification of Owen's three criteria in the exemplars. Second, I establish tolerable inconvenience as the source domain through the same identification of criteria.

The identification of Owen's (1984, 1985) three criteria in the exemplars establishes aging as the target domain, or the more abstract concept that is being structured by a more concrete concept (i.e., tolerable inconvenience). He repeatedly expresses his age, his wife's age, and once mentions his mother-in-law's age as the number of years they have been alive (e.g., 74, 84). After his wife's age, he includes an exclamation point in parentheses (!) which adds forcefulness to his proclamation of her

age. He also refers to being “old” three times and uses the term “geriatric years” to describe his stage in life. In addition, he refers to “still” being “alive” and his “living” friends, underscoring his knowledge of death as the “only alternative” to aging. He states that he is “not tempted” to this alternative and the sentence is followed with an exclamation point which further accentuates his desire to continue aging.

The source domain of tolerable inconvenience is manifested in two distinct ways throughout the language used in the exemplars. First, aging is tolerable because it has positive aspects to it. Twice he uses the word “enjoy” to describe his experiences during his older age as well as the words “fun” and “wonderful” to establish his positive perception of aging. He follows this sentence with an exclamation point which further emphasizes his immense enjoyment of it. Twice he uses the word “still” in reference to being “alive” and “able” to enjoy various activities. The use of this language manifests a positive connotation of aging and indicates his awareness of the fact that, at his age, things could be different. In contrast, aging is inconvenient because of its negative aspects. Twice he refers to the “deterioration” of his “health” in terms of his “ability” to “walk” as becoming “difficult” and then “reduced” to no ability at all. He also refers to his memory as “deteriorating.” In addition, he experiences “shrinking” of his social network through the deaths of friends. The use of this language manifests a negative connotation of aging. Finally, his use of the phrase “tolerable inconvenience” is in direct reference to the aging process and captures the essence of both the positive and the negative aspects that emerge from his letters.



In conclusion, Grampa perceives aging to be a tolerable inconvenience because it encompasses both positive and negative aspects. He finds aging to be vastly enjoyable because it allows him to continue doing the things that bring him pleasure. On the other hand, aging entails the painful loss of both abilities and friends. When the enjoyment and the loss are taken together, aging becomes something that is less than ideal, but certainly, in his words, “better than the alternative.” (2007\_5). Put differently, the positive and the negative aspects of aging balance each other out, making it a tolerable inconvenience.

As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) first posited, we often understand the same phenomena via multiple metaphorical concepts. In keeping with this view, Grampa’s letters reveal a second metaphor regarding aging. In addition to perceiving aging as a tolerable inconvenience, Grampa’s letters also demonstrate that he perceived aging to be a blessing of time. This second conceptual metaphor will be discussed below.

### **Aging is a Blessing of Time**

The metaphor aging is a blessing of time is also manifested through Grampa’s discussion of aging in his letters. Unlike the first metaphor, aging is a tolerable inconvenience, Grampa does not specifically refer to aging as a blessing of time in his letters. However, the language he uses to talk about his age and the aging process indicates that they are a function of time and that time is valuable, something that is given to him by an external force, and something that he appreciates. In this section, I will first articulate the connection between aging and time as demonstrated through Grampa’s letters, establishing aging as the target domain in this metaphor. Second, I present and unpack exemplars to establish Grampa’s view of time as a blessing, the source domain.

Last, I examine the exemplars in terms of the manifesting discourse that constitutes this metaphor.

**Aging is the accumulation of time.** Age, aging, and time are closely intertwined. Age is the accumulation of years and aging is the physiological process that occurs over those years. Years are a common measurement of both time and age in Western culture. Each birthday represents the completion of another year of life and the corresponding age serves as a social marker locating one in a specific stage of the aging process. In other words, age is measured in increments of time. Thus, aging is the accumulation of time.

Discussions of age and aging dominate Grampa's letters. He repeatedly refers to his age as well as the age of others (e.g., I'm 84 years old this year and Gramma reached 80. (2003\_27)) At the beginning of the collection of letters, he refers to his "aging brain" (1989\_2) establishing that, at the age of 70, Grampa considered himself to be aging. As humans, from the moment of birth, we are always growing older. Arguably, however, there comes an age at which we consider ourselves "aging," meaning we view ourselves as old and getting older. According to his letters, Grampa considered himself to be aging when he was 70 and defined himself as "old" at the age of 74 (1993\_8). By the time he was 88, he considered himself "old, old, old." (2007\_5). In other words, Grampa referred to himself as aging throughout his corpus of letters and, over the span of time that Grampa wrote the letters, he progressed from defining himself as old to defining himself as very old. This linkage of age and aging to time will be further developed through the presentation and analysis of the exemplars below.

**Time is a blessing.** Time is a blessing for Grampa because it enables him to continue living and enjoying life. He sees time as a valuable resource that is beyond his control and he is grateful for it. For Grampa, time is a blessing because it is “a thing conducive to happiness or welfare” (m-w.com, def. 2). He feels fortunate to receive it and strives to make the most of it. Though the word “blessing” has religious connotations, it’s use in this metaphor does not. For Grampa, it encompasses the feeling of being granted something that he enjoys and appreciates. Grampa feels lucky and thankful for being given as much time as he has. As such, Grampa feels blessed for having the time to continue enjoying life. This section examines the exemplars that manifest time as a blessing in Grampa’s letters. Time is a blessing because it is valuable and fleeting, it is something that is granted to him, and something he appreciates. Below I examine the manifestation of each of these respectively.

***Time is valuable and fleeting.*** In Western culture, time is often conceptually linked to the notions of resource and motion (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Put differently, we talk about time as though it is something both useful and mobile. Throughout his letters, Grampa’s language invokes these metaphorical concepts. He refers to time as a resource that is valuable to him. It is valuable because he enjoys the time he has. He also refers to time as though it is in constant motion—usually a forward motion. His language implies that time is constantly moving into and out of his reach. For Grampa, time is valuable and fleeting. The following two exemplars begin to illuminate this pattern. The first is taken from a letter written to longtime friends of Grampa’s when he was 74 years old:

We cannot account for the rapid passage of time as we get older. (1993\_9)

The second exemplar is taken from a letter written almost ten years later, when Grampa was 82:

Where does the time go and how long will it last? (2001\_10)

These two excerpts demonstrate Grampa's understanding of time as both resource and in motion that emerges from his letters. Grampa references the idea of motion when he states that he cannot "account" for the "rapid passage of time" as he gets "older." He indicates that, the more years that he accumulates, the quicker the time passes. And, it would seem, it moves at an accelerated pace with each passing year. Grampa asks, "Where does the time go?" He cannot explain where it goes once it moves past him, he just knows that time has inexplicably come and gone.

In addition, time becomes more finite and limited as Grampa gets older, making it an increasingly scarce resource. In this way aging is a direct function of time. Grampa hypothetically asks, "how long will it last?" suggesting both that time can be quantified and, because it is limited, that his supply of time is constantly diminishing and might expire suddenly and without warning. In his 70's, Grampa indicates that time is moving fast. By his 80's he is questioning how much he might have remaining to him. He wonders how much time he might have left in which he can continue to enjoy life. Both exemplars also suggests that time is something that is beyond Grampa's control. He does not know where it goes, nor how much he has. He cannot determine the amount of time he has, how quickly it passes, or what happens when it disappears. For Grampa, time is governed by some external force.

*Time is externally granted.* In this way, time becomes a gift—something that is given to Grampa. He cannot acquire time himself, but must rely on the benevolence of the external force that provides it. It is not clear in Grampa’s letters who or what the external force is that grants this blessing. As a self-described atheist, Grampa does not believe that a God has control in his life. As a result, perhaps he views time itself as the benefactor. It is clear from his language that he considered time to be beyond his power and control. He does not have the ability to determine what happens to it or how much supply he has. He can only accept it as it is given to him. The following exemplar further reveals this sense of time as being beyond his influence. It was written in a condolence letter to a friend whose wife had died:

As you are more acutely aware than we, we do not know how much time is left to us when our health, or survival, will permit us to do these things. (1998\_24)

This exemplar further demonstrates Grampa’s conceptual linkage between time as a valuable resource and something that is beyond his control. First, Grampa does not “know how much time is left,” again suggesting that time can be measured and, especially given his age and that of his contemporaries, that the amount of time remaining to them is increasingly limited. In addition, by stating that “we do not know” about the amount of time given to us, he is indicating that it is beyond all human control—not just Grampa’s. The amount of time we have is not something that we can control or dictate. He further states, “when our health, or survival, will permit us to do these things.” This suggests that both health and survival (i.e., life) are dependent on time. As an aging man, Grampa understands that his time is diminishing. Survival is

essential to continuing to age and good health will allow him to enjoy the time that he is given. Put differently, time is a governing force that both allows and prevents things from happening—things that Grampa likes to do.

“These things” that Grampa is referring to include those moments and experiences that he enjoys: spending time with family and friends, community involvement, traveling, reading, and enjoying nature. Like most people in Western culture, Grampa refers to how time is spent (e.g., “I find it so enjoyable to spend time with old friends; and so few opportunities to do so.” (2001\_49)) Time is a valuable resource to Grampa because it enables him to do the things that give him pleasure—providing him with quality of time. The above exemplar also demonstrates that being in decent health was important to Grampa in order to have that quality of time. Though Grampa’s health was deteriorating, it was a slow and gradual decline that still allowed him to participate in activities he enjoyed until about two years before his death. In this way, time “permits” Grampa to make adjustments in his life in order to adapt to new circumstances as his condition changes over the years.

***Gratitude.*** Time is also a blessing because Grampa feels fortunate to have received as much as he has and still have some time remaining to him, though the amount left is unknown and may suddenly run out. As indicated in the previous exemplar, he is aware that he has received more time than many of his generational contemporaries and that, like those contemporaries and friends, his supply of time will eventually be depleted, ending in death. But in the meantime, he appreciates and enjoys the time he has had and

the time he continues to be given. The following exemplar, taken from a letter written to his brother-in-law, evidences this outlook:

What a lot of great memories can be accumulated if you're able to survive 84 lucky years! (2003\_77)

This exemplar evidences Grampa's enjoyment of the time he has had as well as his perspective that he has been "lucky." He states that he has "accumulated" many "great memories" after "84" years of life. In one letter, written after his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday party, Grampa refers to having a "mental filing cabinet" (1999\_1) full of memories of the different people and experiences throughout his life. Memories are all we have once the present moment in time passes us by, and Grampa has "a lot of great" ones which means he has enjoyed many different times throughout his life. Grampa further states that he has been "able to survive 84 lucky years!" Survival, for Grampa, does not seem to be based on having a skill set that enables a person to endure. Instead, survival appears to be based on luck. The word "able," typically associated with a person's abilities (i.e., skill set), in this exemplar, further indicates that survival is something that has been granted to him, or bestowed upon him. In this sense it seems to translate to "allowed."

As established, Grampa does not know how much time he has remaining or when his supply will be exhausted. Not only is it going faster as he ages, he is aware that it could expire at any moment. Time is a blessing because it is a scarce resource that is granted to Grampa. Time is valuable because he finds quality in it and enjoys it. Time is also a blessing because it is something that Grampa is grateful for and appreciates. He is especially grateful because he cannot determine the quantity of time remaining to him.

He must simply accept whatever amount is given to him. The following exemplars demonstrate this sense of appreciation that emerges from Grampa's letters. In a letter to a longtime friend, Grampa, age 82, states:

We are grateful for every day, week, month all of which slip by faster and faster!  
(2001\_30)

Sadie and I are grateful to be alive and in as good health as we are. You should see us trying to get up off the floor when we have been sitting on the carpet, or the fireplace hearth, etc. Hilarious! (2005\_15)

This exemplar evidences Grampa's appreciation for the time that he is given. The smaller measurements of time, a "day," "week," "month," add up to the years that measure Grampa's chronological age. He is "grateful" for each of them. Using the term "we," he includes his wife because, for Grampa, it is a blessing that both of them are alive and able. In the second exemplar, Grampa says that they "are grateful to be alive and in as good health as we are," reiterating that they appreciate the time they have been given in terms of both life and decent health. He continues to describe trying to "get up off the floor," suggesting that their condition isn't perfect but it is good enough to continue enjoying things. He finishes that exemplar with the word, "Hilarious!" which indicates that he had a sense of humor about the deterioration of his condition and the circumstances that arise as a result. In the first exemplar, he states that the increments of time that he is grateful for "slip by faster and faster" thus reiterating the notions from the previous exemplars that time is moving forward quickly and is beyond his control. The faster time goes, the more finite it becomes. Grampa is aware that his supply of time is



limited and he appreciates each moment he is given, both because he is able to enjoy those moments and because he knows that they will not last forever. Eventually his supply of time will be completely spent, resulting in his death.

***Death is expiration.*** Death is the ultimate consequence of aging. In metaphorically understanding aging as a blessing of time, Grampa conjointly conceives of death as the running out of time. Death is a dominant theme in Grampa's letters. In Western culture, death is a taboo topic. We don't like thinking about it, talking about it, or even acknowledging it. However, Grampa talks about the deaths of his contemporaries as well as referencing his own eventual death. He speaks about death pragmatically and often with humor. As a result of our cultural silence regarding death, we often use metaphors and euphemisms to refer to death. These linguistic devices were evident in Grampa's letters and will be further developed later in this chapter. In order to fully articulate aging is a blessing of time, however, the following exemplar evidences one of Grampa's utilization of these linguistic devices (i.e., euphemism) to talk about death. It was written to four couples, the majority of whom were Grampa's generational contemporaries:

Sometime before the expiration of 2001 and, heaven forbid, before the expiration of any of us, Sadie and I would like to invite the eight of you to a brunch or dinner at our house..." (2001\_57)

The above exemplar evidences Grampa's perception of death as the end of time for a person. When something expires, it runs out of time. Using this term suggests that, when we are born, we are given a finite supply of time. As we get older and begin to

define ourselves as aging, we simultaneously recognize that the amount of time we have to live is decreasing. When our supply of time is depleted, we die. This exemplar subtly references the two aspects of death Grampa typically referred to in his letters: his own and others. In it, Grampa is implying that he and his wife and any of the recipients may run out of time at any moment. This letter was written at the end of August so Grampa is suggesting that any of them could die in less than six months. Given their age group, Grampa is referencing the very real possibility that the time they have been given may “expire” without warning.

Thus far, it has been demonstrated that Grampa’s language establishes time as a valuable resource that is in perpetual, rapid motion. It is given to him by an external force and is valuable because it is scarce and he enjoys it. As a result, he appreciates it and is cognizant of the fact that time will eventually expire, bringing death. Taken together, this leads to the emergence of the metaphor aging is a blessing of time. The manifesting discourse of this metaphor will be further developed below by analyzing the exemplars according to Owen’s (1984, 1985) three linguistic criteria.

**Manifesting Discourse.** To sufficiently develop the emergent metaphor of aging is a blessing of time, the discussion below analyzes the exemplars presented above by identifying Owen’s (1984, 1985) three criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. I chose Owen’s method of metaphoric analysis in order to ensure that the findings of this analysis remain rooted in Grampa’s language. Recurrence in language is the same thread of meaning, articulated in different words, while repetition is the use of the same words multiple times. Forcefulness involves the emphasis with which something is said (e.g.,

underlining, exclamation points). Below, I analyze Grampa's language according to these specific criteria as a means of further establishing the manifestation of the metaphor aging is a blessing of time. First, I establish aging (target domain) as it is revealed through the identification of Owen's three criteria in the exemplars. Second, I establish time as a blessing (source domain) through the same identification of criteria.

The dominance of the concepts of age and aging throughout Grampa's letters establishes aging as the target domain in this metaphor. It is clearly a salient aspect of his identity. Throughout the above exemplars, Grampa refers to his age or status of being "alive." He refers to getting "older" and being "84" "years" old. He finishes the sentence in which he states his age with an exclamation point which suggests an emphatic delivery of the sentiment and his age. Twice he uses the word "survive" to describe his status as still being among the living.

Grampa's language also manifests time as valuable and fleeting. The word "time" is used three times and "it" is used twice to refer to time. Grampa wonders both "how much" time is "left" to him and "how long will it last?" These suggest that time is quantifiable and finite. Grampa also wonders, "where does the time go?" and cannot "account for the rapid passage of time" suggesting that it is moving somewhere unknown to him and exclaims that it is going "faster and faster!" The exclamation point denotes a forceful, or emphatic, delivery of that sentiment. Clearly, Grampa feels that time is not just in motion, but moving at an accelerated rate as he ages. Grampa also refers to common measurements of time, "day," "week," "month," and "year." Finally, twice

Grampa uses the term “expiration” to describe the end of a year (i.e., increment of time) and, possibly, the end of his or his recipient’s lives (i.e., personal supply of time).

Grampa’s language further establishes time as a blessing through reference to time being externally granted and something that he is grateful for. He suggests that time “permits” certain things by granting “health, or survival.” The implication of this is that time is something that is given by an external force. It is not something that Grampa has the power to control or accumulate of his own volition. Twice the word “health” is used to describe that he and his wife have enough of it to still enjoy life. In addition, he refers to evidence of his physical decline as “Hilarious!” indicating that he is in good humor and has a positive outlook despite his physical (dis) abilities. In stating that he has “accumulated” “a lot of great memories” he is also referencing the enjoyment of times past. Grampa twice states that he is “grateful” for the time and health he has been given. He is not just grateful for the time that has passed, but for the each additional increment of time that he is given. Each of these increments is another forward move in the aging process. Finally, he feels fortunate to have been “able to survive 84 lucky years!” The underlining of “lucky years” and exclamation point at the end communicates extreme forcefulness in the delivery of that sentiment.

In conclusion, Grampa’s letters indicate that he perceives aging as a blessing of time. Aging and time are directly intricately intertwined in that aging is the accumulation of time. Grampa’s letters suggest that we are all given a finite amount of time to live. The older we get the less time we have as we have already depleted much of our supply. In this way time is valuable and fleeting. It is valuable to Grampa because he enjoys the

time he has already had and the continuation of time as it comes to him. Further, it is something that is given to Grampa, he cannot take it for his own. He does not determine the amount of time he has or when it will be taken away. As a result of time being enjoyable and granted to him, he is grateful for it. He appreciates the time he receives and wants to make the most of it while he is still able. It is in this way that aging becomes a blessing of time.

Thus far in this chapter, two metaphorical concepts regarding aging have been articulated as they were manifested through Grampa's letters. These metaphorical concepts are presented as linguistic expressions, aging is a tolerable inconvenience and aging is a blessing of time, and were derived from the language used in his letters. These metaphorical concepts demonstrate two ways in which Grampa conceived of aging. A metaphorical analysis of his letters would be incomplete, however, without an examination of the linguistic metaphors, or figures of speech, that Grampa uses. This chapter now turns, then, to an explication of those metaphors.

### **Death Through Metaphor**

Grampa utilizes few metaphorical linguistic expressions in his letters. Significantly, the metaphors that Grampa does employ predominately refer to death and dying. Though he does use the words die and death in his letters, he more often uses linguistic metaphors to express himself regarding these concepts. When using these metaphors, they typically fall under one of two categories: metaphorical expressions regarding his generational contemporaries and their closeness to the experience of death, and to death itself. This section presents several of those linguistic metaphors as

exemplars and analyzes their deeper meanings. This section is organized a bit differently that the first two metaphorical concepts discussed in that all of the exemplars are presented together and evidence of the manifesting discourse is included in the subsequent analysis.

Especially in the latter years of Grampa's collection of letters, he often remarks on the deaths of his generational contemporaries. Grampa lived to be 91 years old and, up until just two years before his own death, he kept in written correspondence with a substantial amount of people. It stands to reason, then, that he experienced the deaths of many friends and contemporaries during the latter part of his life. He talks about these deaths in his letters by informing recipients of the deaths of mutual relatives or friends and describing his attendance at funerals of these individuals. In addition, several letters are condolence letters written to the spouse or children of the deceased. He also makes references to these deaths in letters whose purpose is not about the death of someone but simply are musings about his own and his age group's mortality. The following exemplars evidence this pattern and his use of metaphor to express it. The first was written to a mentee of Grampa's who is younger than him. The next three were written to several different longtime friends of Grampa's generation:

Outside of Jody and Tiff we saw only a couple of old, old friends of our vintage.

That vintage decreases each year, we find! (1994\_4)

Our contemporaries seem to be dropping off like flies! (2001\_34)

I have enjoyed it so much that I ordered a few extra copies to distribute to the endangered species classified as my contemporaries who grew up with me in Lincoln and shared some of things that my family and I enjoyed in those days gone by. (2002\_32)

Also hope we can see each other again before one of us conks out. It seems to be endemic among our general age group! (2001\_43)

The above exemplars demonstrate Grampa's use of metaphors to discuss death and his age cohort. First, he refers to his "old, old friends" as a "vintage." The term "vintage" suggests something that is both old and rare and from a similar time period. Grampa adds emphasis to the idea of "old" by using it twice as a preceding description of the friends that he is referring to. Used twice in this exemplar, the only other time that Grampa uses the term "vintage" in his letters is to refer to a car, his 1937 Packard. Further, in stating that "That vintage decreases each year," he is referring to the deaths of those friends and contemporaries who are a part of his generation, or "vintage." The exclamation point at the end of this statement provides additional emphasis to his continued experience of the deaths of friends.

Furthering his perception of his generation being old and rare, Grampa refers to his "contemporaries" as an "endangered species." Typically, an "endangered species" is used to refer to a group of animals or plants that are limited in number and facing extinction. In using this term to describe his "contemporaries," Grampa is implying that they are a rare breed facing imminent death. Though some "endangered species" may be protected as a means of trying to induce population growth, Grampa knows that this will

not be the case for his generation. He knows that the extinction of his generation is inevitable.

To show evidence of the extensive nature of the deaths of those in his age cohort, Grampa states that his “contemporaries seem to be dropping off like flies!” This is a commonly used metaphor in Western culture to suggest that something is rapidly dying off in large numbers. This further establishes the pattern of metaphor that Grampa utilizes in his letters to comment on the extensive loss of friends and contemporaries that he experiences in his later years. His contemporaries are not just dying one by one in slow succession; they are dying quickly and in large numbers. “Dropping” further suggests that their deaths are swift and immediate. Death happened all of a sudden and without warning. Though this is likely not the case on an individual basis, Grampa, an observer of this phenomenon, experiences it in this way due to the large numbers of friends he is losing. In the same letter as this exemplar, Grampa writes, “Sadie and I have spent two full weeks of the past month going to funerals,” (2001\_34) thus indicating the extent to which he was losing friends. The exclamation point at the end of this sentence further highlights the force with which Grampa feels this sentiment.

In addition to utilizing linguistic metaphors to express his perceptions regarding his age cohort and their imminent death, Grampa also uses these expressions to describe the deaths of people—his own and others. In the final exemplar, Grampa states that he hopes he and his recipient “can see each other again” before one of them “conks out.” This term invokes a common cultural metaphor, especially in relation to masculinity, of body as machine (Calasanti, 2004). It suggests that the body simply shuts down or stops



working suddenly. It is similar to the notion of “dropping” discussed above that implies an abrupt and immediate ceasing of function. In his letters, he twice uses “conk” to refer to death and, like the word “vintage,” the only other time it appears in his letters is to refer to a car that broke down. He finishes the last exemplar with the forceful exclamation that “It seems to be endemic among our general age group!” reiterating and further establishing the magnitude of deaths that Grampa is experiencing among his age cohort.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter presents the findings from Research Question 2: What do the metaphors that emerge from personal letters reveal about the construction of the aging male identity? The findings from the analysis were twofold. Two conceptual metaphors were revealed through direct examination of Grampa’s language. The first metaphor, that aging is a tolerable inconvenience emerged because of Grampa’s discussions of aging as both positive and negative. He enjoys aging and the experiences it brings but he also suffers loss of abilities and friends as a result of aging. The second, aging is a blessing of time emerges because Grampa refers to age and aging as direct functions of time and he perceives the time he has as valuable, externally granted, and he is grateful for it. Exemplars were presented for each of these conceptual metaphors, followed by an analysis and discussion that reveals deeper meanings behind Grampa’s words. Each metaphor concludes with a detailed extrapolation of the manifesting discourse that appears in the exemplars. Second, the linguistic metaphors that Grampa uses in his letters are examined and then analyzed with attention to deeper meanings and manifesting

discourse. Those metaphors primarily deal with the concept of death and provide insight into Grampa's understanding of death through metaphor. Taken together, these conceptual and linguistic metaphors provide a window from which we can see into the construction and negotiation of Grampa's aging identity.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion of Findings**

### **Chapter Overview**

This study examines the construction of an aging male identity as it emerges through personal letters written over the last 20 years of the author's life. Letters are a presentation of self and, thus, are representative of identity (Stanley, 2004). Each letter in Grampa's corpus is an interaction frozen in time that reflects the social and relational worlds of the writer and his recipients (Jolly & Stanley, 2005). In this way, in each of Grampa's letters, he is presenting an aspect of himself and thereby representing aspects of his identity within this unique form of interaction.

In order to situate the discussion of findings, it is important to briefly reflect on the gap that exists in current literature. In family communication, there is a dearth of literature on aging men and their identity and relationships. Research on older men in other fields is emerging, though it is still limited (King & Calasanti, 2013). Literature in aging and family communication rarely mentions men and, when it does, is often in comparison to women (Bates, 2009). In addition, the literature that does reference men presents some of the challenges that are faced by old men and portrays them as lacking in relationships (Tarrant, 2012). Though it is important to explicate the very real challenges associated with aging, it is also important to illuminate the potential opportunities as well, especially as they pertain to men.

Research question 1 asks: What themes emerge from the personal letters written by an aging man? In answer, two dominant themes emerged from the letters: (a) relationality and (b) age & aging. The two themes are comprised of sub-themes. Relationality encompasses sub-themes that include grandpa's relationships with his wife, his family, and his friends. This first theme evidences the importance of a variety of relationships in Grampa's later years. Age & aging encompass sub-themes that include health, death, self-expression, and time. This second theme demonstrates the salience of Grampa's age as well as the aging process and how these impacted his later years.

Research Question 2 asks: What do the metaphors that emerge from personal letters reveal about the identity construction of the aging male identity? In answer, two conceptual metaphors emerged: (a) aging is a tolerable inconvenience and (b) aging is a blessing of time. Further, linguistic metaphorical expressions used in the letters suggest that Grampa understands death through metaphor. In essence the findings reveal an identity that is highly relational and indelibly marked by age, aging, and death.

In this chapter, I discuss the emergent themes and metaphors by presenting key constructs from symbolic interaction and life-span communication perspectives that serve as a framework for interpreting and understanding the findings of this study.

### **Meanings**

Symbolic interaction and life-span communication perspectives provide a framework from which the results of this study are understood and subsequently discussed. The themes and metaphors that are revealed in this study reflect how Grampa

negotiates and performs his identity in later life. They demonstrate his presentation of self as it emerges from a linguistic analysis of his letters.

Symbolic interaction suggests that identity is linguistically negotiated and performed through interaction and relationships with others (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Identity is negotiated as we make sense of and assign meaning to the various experiences and relationships in which we are involved. This negotiation results in the performance of a particular identity. Goffman (1959) suggests that identity is a performance in which actors enact particular roles in particular contexts. The purpose of the performance is positive impression management, or supplying the audience with an impression that is consistent with the desired identity of the actor (Goffman, 1959). Grampa's letters allow him a unique way to manage the impression he gives to his recipients because he has control over the interaction and the ability to choose what to say and how to say it based on his own needs and desires.

While symbolic interaction emphasizes the active and reflexive construction of identity in various interactions, life-span communication extends this notion to include examination of how a person's identity is actively and reflexively constructed throughout various interactions across the entire lifespan. A key tenet of this perspective is the ability to adapt to changing life circumstances as one ages (Pecchioni, et al., 2005). Grampa's letters, written over a twenty year span in his later life, present evidence of the construction of his aging identity as he adapts to changing social and physiological circumstances throughout the last two decades of his life.

At the heart of both perspectives is language. Language is the foundation of our social lives and is used to express one's self, convey meanings, and create shared understandings. In this way, language is used to make sense of the self, others, and the social world. As a result, language is a portal through which we can view the construction of identity. Examining language in use is especially significant as identity work is accomplished through discursive practices in everyday talk (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005; Tracy, 2002). Thematic and metaphoric analyses allow for an in-depth examination of Grampa's everyday language in his letters. By locating instances of repeated, recurring, and forceful language used in the letters, the negotiation and performance of his identity is revealed in the form of dominant themes and conceptual metaphors.

This discussion focuses on three specific aspects of Grampa's aging identity that emerged from the results of this study. Grampa makes sense of himself through his relationships, his age and the aging process, and the prospect of death. The repetition of these three concepts throughout the letters indicates that he is actively making sense of and meaning from these concepts and what they mean to him. This in turn effects how he presents himself in his letters. As a result, Grampa's letters linguistically construct an aging male identity that is highly relational and indelibly shaped by age, aging, and the prospect of death. First, I will discuss relationality.

**Relationality.** Central to both theories that serve as a framework for these results is that relationships and the roles people enact within those relationships are central to the formation of identity (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005; Pecchioni, et al., 2005). These roles and

relationships provide us with ways to define ourselves, develop self-concepts, make sense of the world and our place in it, and form behaviors as a result. In short, roles and relationships are crucial to our overall construction of identity (Tracy, 2002). Grampa's language establishes that roles and relationships are central to his overall construction of identity through repeated reference to his wife, his family members, and his friends as well as to his specific roles within those relationships.

Through his letters, Grampa's relationships emerge as a foundational aspect of his aging male identity. He defines himself in and through relationships throughout the collection of letters. A large part of how Grampa makes sense of his life and his place in the world is through those relationships. In other words, he ascribes meaning to his life through his relationships and the roles he fulfills within those relationships. In this way, we see the construction of his identity with a variety of relational others. Though many relationships emerge as vital to Grampa's presentation of self, the most impactful of these relationships is that with his wife, Gramma Sadie.

Though none of the letters were written to his wife, she emerges as central to Grampa's negotiation and performance of identity throughout the collection. Through repeated use of the pronouns "we," and "our," he presents himself and his wife as one entity, and his marriage as a partnership. According to Tracy (2002), the ways in which people refer to themselves and others reveals their interpretation of the relational identities inherent in those relationships. By using pronouns that include his wife in the sharing of his thoughts, feelings, and activities, Grampa is indicating that his wife and his marriage are critical to his understanding and concept of self. He constructs himself as a

dedicated, inclusive husband who views his marriage as highly satisfying. In his words, it is a “happy, happy union!” As such, Grampa sees himself as inextricably united with his wife and constructs an identity that encompasses her and their relationship.

However, Grampa’s presentation of self is not restricted only to his relationship with his wife.

Grampa’s identity is created through all of the relationships in his life.

According to life-span communication, the roles that we enact help define who we are to others as well as who we are to ourselves (Pecchioni, et al., 2005). The importance of his relationships with other family members and their function in his construction of identity is best demonstrated through his use of self-referencing practices (Tracy, 2002).

Throughout his letters, Grampa consistently and continuously refers to himself by explicitly stating his role in relationship to his recipient(s). He reminds his recipient(s) that he is their “reminiscent brother,” or their “Uncle John.” These kinship terms (Tracy, 2002) directly state the relationship in which Grampa and his recipient are engaged. The fact that Grampa uses these terms in the body of his letters, and not just in signature lines underscores the value he placed on those roles.

As shown by Goffman’s (1959) approach, social roles are important in symbolic interaction because people hold various positions in society and in relationships. By naming these positions, or roles, people name their own and others’ positions in interactions and form expectations for behavior based on those positions (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005). In this way, Grampa is invoking expectations for those relationships and the interactions within them and thereby communicating relational meanings.



Roles carry a host of social and personal norms and expectations with them for how people are supposed to act in interactions with others (Goffman, 1959). The enactment of roles is based on the norms and expectations that we learn through daily interaction with relational others and society as a whole (Pecchioni, et al., 2005). By referencing these roles, Grampa implies an adherence to and respect for them. These references encompass the societal meanings of each role as well as the meanings that have been created through the interactions Grampa has had with his relational partners (i.e., recipients) throughout their relationships. He is commenting on his view of the connection between himself and his recipient(s) which implies various social and behavioral scripts. In this way, the invocation of Grampa's specific role(s) reminds the letter recipient(s) of not only who Grampa is in relationship to them, but also the value that Grampa places on these roles and his sense of duty in fulfilling them. In this way, he continues to define himself. He constructs himself as a caring and interested family man (e.g., husband, grandfather, uncle). Each of these roles suggests particular relational dynamics inherent in the relationship.

By stating his role(s), Grampa underscores the importance of power structures and relational processes. Using kinship terms to invoke specific roles implies power structures and relational processes within the referenced relationships (Tracy, 2002). Power refers to a person's ability to influence another person's thoughts or behaviors and the resistance to these attempts by the other person (Berger, 1985). Life-span communication suggests that, as we age, we acquire more power through learning more

about how to handle life circumstances and acquiring more resources (Pecchioni, et al., 2005).

A dominant role for Grampa is that of patriarch of his family. He assumed this role in his early twenties as a result of his father dying at a relatively young age. Miller (2008) demonstrates that the unexpected loss of a father can have tremendous impact on the resulting masculine identity of the son. Grampa spoke often of the impact his father had on him regarding the importance of family and being a father. Grampa's adoption of a patriarchal role in his early twenties continued to expand as he got married, had his own children, and then became a grandfather. By the time this collection of letters began, he had been enacting a patriarchal role with a number of family members for close to fifty years.

Grampa often talked about his father's involvement with both him and his sisters. The involvement Grampa experienced with his father likely shaped his performance in the patriarchal role. Research indicates that parenting behaviors are often replicated by children, and this is true with fathers and sons (Floyd & Bowman, 2006). According to Morman and Floyd (2002), fatherhood is a social construction based on historical and social ideology and has shifted between a distant, authoritarian style of fathering and a caring, nurturing style throughout the last four centuries. In the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Grampa was born, the culture of fatherhood included fathers as involved in both domestic duties and the development of children (Morman & Floyd). As such, Grampa's father likely modeled for him a fatherhood that included involvement with

children and nurturing family relationships which developed throughout Grampa's life and into other, extended family relationships.

According to life-span communication, individual family roles influence and are influenced by other family roles (Pecchioni, et al., 2005). In this sense, Grampa's understanding and enactment of his role as a brother is intricately intertwined with his role as a husband. Each performance of a particular familial role is a facet of his overall identity. In other words, Grampa's role to his various relational others is a part of his larger identity. Taken together, these roles demonstrate his negotiation and performance of identity resulting in the construction of an overall identity that portrays Grampa as an active and involved family man.

In addition to the familial relationships that developed over Grampa's lifetime, many meaningful friendships developed as well. These relationships too, held tremendous meaning for Grampa and served to complete the picture of the highly relational identity that Grampa constructs in his letters.

Friendships are among the most significant and unique types of relationships we will experience in life due in part to their voluntary and egalitarian nature (Pecchioni, et al., 2005). The majority of Grampa's friendships were longstanding. A few date back to Grampa's childhood and were formed through family friends of his parents. Many of his friendships were established in high school, college, and law school and continued throughout Grampa's life. A vast number of his letters are both written to friends and/or include references to his friends (e.g., visits with them, updates on mutual friends). Nussbaum, et al. (2000) found that friendship may be as important, or more important, in

successful adaptation to life than our family relationships. In addition, social support is an important predictor of overall health and well-being (Pecchioni, et al., 2005).

Grampa's letters demonstrate that he successfully adapts to his changing circumstances and is experiencing overall good health. In this way, understanding that Grampa has both strong family ties and a variety of important friendships has important implications for his overall health and well-being and ability to adapt to changing life circumstances as he ages.

In sum, Grampa's letters reveal a highly relational man whose relationships and the roles he fulfills within those relationships are paramount to his construction of identity in his later life. Though research suggests that men tend to focus more on non-familial roles (Pecchioni, Wright et al., 2005), Grampa's letters indicate that his roles within his family were of extreme importance to him. His relationship with his wife surfaces as the most intricately tied to his identity while other family relationships also emerge as highly salient. In addition to his family, Grampa's friendships are important and indicate strong implications for his aging identity.

**Age & Aging.** The following section discusses how Grampa negotiated and performed an aging identity as he adapted to his changing life circumstances. First, I briefly discuss the societal constructions of age and the process of aging as a foundation for examining the ways in which Grampa constructs his own age and his aging identity. Next, I discuss Grampa's negotiation and performance of his chronological age before moving on to discuss his negotiation and performance of aging in terms of the two

metaphorical concepts, or figures of thought, that emerge from Grampa's letters. Finally, I discuss how the prospect of death is central to his understanding of aging.

One's chronological age is a social identity and part of how a person defines himself to, and is defined by, others (Williams & Harwood, 2004). The socially derived meanings of age attach certain attributes to certain ages. What it means to be young is very different than what it means to be old (Pecchioni, et al., 2005). The socially derived meaning of "old" within Western culture equates it with cognitive and mental declines, which speaks to the ways that people think and act (North & Fiske, 2012). In fact, as children we begin to learn that being old is undesirable as are old people themselves (Levy, 2003). These negative perceptions, often based on stereotypes, become internalized as we grow older, eventually becoming self-stereotypes (Levy, 2009). Becoming old, or aging, is perceived to be fraught with loneliness and ill-health (Dykstra, 2011; Ryan, 2009). These and other negative societal conceptions of aging perpetuate a stigma of aging that affects both people's perceptions of themselves and their interactions with others (Levy, 2009; Hummert, 2010). Both age & aging emerge as central to Grampa's construction of identity in his letters. First, I begin with a discussion of how Grampa negotiates and performs his chronological age.

*Age.* Grampa often refers to his chronological age and establishes himself as both old and aging throughout his letters. Grampa defines himself as old at 74 and then as very old at 88. By continuously referring to his chronological age, Grampa is indicating that age is a foundational aspect of his definition of self. It defines and describes him to himself and to his recipient(s). He is making sense out of himself through assigning

meaning to his chronological age. In short, in his letters he constructs himself as an aged, and aging, person. By stating his age he is invoking the meanings that he has for that age as well as those meanings that he presumes his recipients might attach to his age based on his interpretation of past interactions and societal perceptions.

The first time Grampa refers to himself as “old,” at the age of 74, he puts the word in quotations and it is followed by the words, “I guess,” which indicates that he is only defining himself as old because other people would, as the socially derived meanings of age would designate 74 as old. This indicates that Grampa thinks that society would deem Grampa old, so he reluctantly defines himself that way as well. In this way, we see the negotiation of Grampa’s identity in regard to age. We see that he is attaching meaning (i.e., old), based on societal standards and Grampa’s awareness of those standards, to his chronological age (i.e., 74). Symbolic interaction views individuals as active and reflexive and, thus, able to perceive themselves as both subject and object (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). In so doing, people are able to take the perspective of others and interpret how those others perceive the individual. In this way, Grampa is able to see himself as others might see him (i.e., an old person). However, though Grampa is defining himself as old, he doesn’t necessarily feel that he is old.

Grampa’s negotiation and subsequent performance of his aging identity demonstrates that he, contrary to popular conceptions, finds aging enjoyable. In his letters, Grampa refers to an oft used admonition from his mother-in-law that growing old is “no fun.” This is not only his mother-in-laws belief, but society’s as well. We have constructed old as a problem—a time of loss, loneliness, and ill health. In short, aging

has been constructed as “no fun.” But Grampa, on the other hand, does find it fun and enjoyable.

In this way, we see how messages from both particular and generalized others have been internalized by Grampa and have resulted in a differing performance of identity. He does not perform an aging identity that is solely about loss and decline, instead he performs one that emphasizes enjoyment and positive experiences. We see his active and reflexive negotiation of identity in the fact that Grampa is able to interpret those messages from others, but still create his own definitions of what it means to be old, and then perform an identity based on those (re)definitions. Through his own experiences and interactions he has come to define old as fun and enjoyable. The language used in his letters reveals a performance of aging identity that is in accordance with his own personally ascribed meanings.

This (re)definition of age is further demonstrated by Grampa’s perception that age is an achievement. In addition to being fun and enjoyable, the meaning that he assigns to various chronological ages is one of accomplishment and attainment. Throughout his letters he uses words like “reached,” and “attained,” to refer to his and others’ chronological ages. He is proud of being old. He sees each year of life that he accumulates as another milestone reached. As discussed earlier, Grampa’s father died at the relatively young age of 56. Grampa believed that he, too, might suffer a similar fate and not live past middle life. This explains why Grampa viewed living into his 60’s and beyond as a worthwhile accomplishment. It is something he feared would not happen and he takes pride in the fact that it has.

The notion of age as accomplishment further exemplifies a negotiation with societal standards of being old and the performance of a (re)definition of an aging identity for Grampa. Research suggests that language can serve to affirm or disconfirm identity (Bergen, Suter, & Daas, 2006) and is used to reconstruct the self in particular social contexts (van den Hoonaard, 2009). The above examples demonstrate that Grampa's use of language works to construct a particular identity that disconfirms that which society has assigned to him based on his age. In essence, he is (re)defining what it means to be old.

Fourteen years after he first reluctantly defines himself as old, Grampa declares that he and Gramma are "old, old, old." The use of the word old three times in succession suggests that Grampa now readily agrees that he is not just old, but very old. In this letter, he proceeds to describe his reliance on mobility devices to help him get around as a result of his physical deterioration. Still, there is a tone of enjoyment and optimism in his letters. He is adapting to being very old and considers it "better than the alternative." Through Grampa's own definitions of himself and witnessing both his negotiation of meanings and subsequent performances of identity, we begin to see his process of aging as it was revealed through his letters.

Grampa first defines himself as "aging" at the age of 70, just one year after Grampa's corpus of letters begins. Therefore, throughout the entirety of the collection, Grampa considers himself to be aging. Grampa's negotiation and performance of his identity throughout his aging process is captured in the two metaphorical concepts that emerge from the linguistic analysis of his letters. As evidenced by Lakoff and Johnson



(1980), metaphorical concepts reflect how we think and, therefore, how we act. In other words, they reflect both the negotiation and performance of identity. As such, the metaphorical concepts that emerge from Grampa's letters demonstrate how Grampa negotiated and performed an aging identity.

*Aging.* Grampa's language indicates that he finds aging to be both a tolerable inconvenience and a blessing of time. These conceptualizations of aging suggest that, for Grampa, aging encompasses both positive and negative aspects. He makes sense of aging by describing the positive attributes of it as well as the negative attributes of it in great detail in his letters. He also equates aging with time and considers it to be a blessing to have the time he has had as well as the prospect of more time. This is another way in which we see negotiation and performance at work in his letters. Grampa is able to reflect on his experiences, make sense of them, and perform an identity that is in accordance with his ascribed meaning of those experiences. In other words, the language he uses suggests that he thinks of aging as a tolerable inconvenience as well as a blessing of time and, in turn, that same language translates into performance of identity. Each of these metaphorical concepts will be elaborated below.

*Aging is a tolerable inconvenience.* First, Grampa finds aging to be a tolerable inconvenience because he views it as having both positive and negative aspects. For Grampa, these aspects balance each other out, making the sum total of his aging experiences something that is bothersome but manageable. What makes aging tolerable, or positive, is that he finds aging to be enjoyable. In addition, though he has been diagnosed with an eventually fatal disease, Grampa's health deterioration was gradual

and, overall, he considers himself to be in fairly good health which enables him to continue to find quality in his life. Grampa finds aging inconvenient, or negative, because of the loss and decline that it entails. The loss, however, is buffered by enjoyment, resulting in his perception of aging as being a tolerable inconvenience. Below, I discuss Grampa's presentation of positive aspects of aging and then discuss his presentation of negative aspects of aging.

Grampa's letters reveal that his health status, as well his wife's, are crucial to the negotiation and performance of his aging identity. He describes himself and Gramma Sadie as being in "reasonably good health" and "still able" to do the things that they enjoy doing (e.g., visiting with friends and family, traveling, community involvement). For Grampa, his overall health helped to determine his outlook on life and his ability to find quality in that life. He feels grateful for this because he is aware that his situation could be different. He has friends who are dying, losing spouses, and suffering from varying levels of poor health and incapacitation. In this way, he is thinking from the perspective of the other and making sense of his own situation. He recognizes that his life could be different and he feels fortunate for the fact that both he and Gramma are healthy enough to continue the activities they enjoy which provides him (them) with quality of life. For these reasons, Grampa perceives aging as positive.

However, his letters also trace the trajectory of his physical deterioration. In his letters, we see his adaptation to these health losses most profoundly through his description of his physical deterioration and increased reliance on mobility devices to get around as well as his comments about the increased responsibility his wife assumed as a

result of Grampa's physical decline. He discusses these changes forthrightly and seemingly without embarrassment or chagrin. They are revealed as the necessary progression of his ability to continue doing things that he enjoys doing. In other words, he is adapting to the physiological changes brought on by the aging process. Even as the deterioration progresses he continues to describe himself as being in relatively good health. For Grampa, good health means that he is not mentally or physically incapacitated to the point that he cannot continue doing enjoyable activities. His collection of letters ends when he has finally reached a point of incapacitation that deems it difficult, if not impossible, to continue writing letters (presumably an activity that he enjoyed immensely). As a result, we do not see how he negotiated and performed his identity when the significance of that deterioration overtook him and precluded him from engaging in the things he enjoyed.

In addition to the loss of health, Grampa's letters discuss the deaths of friends and generational contemporaries. Grampa was in written correspondence with a substantial amount of people that he considered good friends—whether from childhood, college and law school days, or friendships developed over the course of his career and then retirement. Nussbaum et al. (2000) found that older adults described having different sets of friends and that each of these groups of friends is considered important to a full life. This appears true in Grampa's letters. This means that, as he aged, so too did his large network of friends and, inevitably, the ones in his generation began to get ill and die. Though the majority of his letters remain upbeat and positive, the significance of

this loss becomes apparent in Grampa's letters as the tone of his letters in later years is one of melancholy when discussing certain deaths.

Through his detailed descriptions of physiological and social loss we see the changes that Grampa is experiencing and how he adapts to those changes. Life-span communication suggests that change and adaptability are central to understanding how identity is developed over the course of one's life as one navigates through different stages of life. A central tenet of life-span communication is that we develop more sophisticated communication skills as we age as a result of our experiences and interactions and our reflections on each (Pechhioni, Wright, & Nussbaum, 2005). In this way, Grampa's experiences and interactions have helped him learn how to cope with and adapt to the losses he is suffering. All of his previous experiences with death serve as a frame of reference for the present and future ones and enable him to adapt and negotiate what these losses mean for him.

Taken together, we see how Grampa interprets both the positive and negative aspects of aging and attaches the meaning of a tolerable inconvenience to those experiences. It is important to note that the loss of physical abilities and the loss of friends are very difficult and painful experiences that are certainly more than mere inconvenience. They are very real phenomena that force Grampa to ascertain and attribute his own meanings to those experiences and negotiate what they mean for him. As a result, when these experiences are considered in conjunction with the positive meanings that Grampa ascribes to his aging process, we see that, for Grampa, they begin to balance each other out, becoming a tolerable inconvenience. He adapts to the losses in

his life by maintaining an optimistic perspective and feeling fortunate to that have the quality of life that he does. This adaptation is further evidenced through his understanding of aging as a blessing of time.

*Aging is a blessing of time.* The second conceptual metaphor, aging is a blessing of time, is another way in which Grampa makes sense of his aging process. He equates aging with time, and indicates that it is something that is valuable to him. It is also something that he is grateful for because he knows that someday he will run out of time, and his aging process will end in death. Each of these will be explicated below.

Age is measured in increments of time (i.e., years) and aging is the physiological process that occurs over time; thus, aging is the accumulation of time (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles). In Western culture, time is conceptually linked to the notions of motion and resource (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). We view time as moving (usually forward) and valuable. Grampa remarks on the “rapid passage of time” as he gets older demonstrating his adherence to cultural notions of time as motion. This evokes an image of a moving sidewalk on which Grampa is standing. It keeps moving faster and faster under his feet and he is powerless to slow it down. He further wonders, “How long will it last?” indicating that time is a scarce resource which will eventually run out, and again, he does not have control over when that will happen. The moving sidewalk will simply cease to move one day. In these ways, we see that Grampa is actively interpreting the socially derived meanings of time and how they impact his life given his age, and therefore, his position in the life cycle.

When viewed as a resource, especially a scarce one, time is valuable (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For Grampa, it is valuable both because of its finite nature and because it equates to life, which he finds enjoyable, despite the loss that it entails. He expresses gratitude for the time that he has already been given as well as for whatever amount of time he may have remaining to him. His negotiation of this is evidenced in his ruminations on the illnesses and deaths of friends. He considers it “lucky” that he has been able to have not just time, but quality of that time. He recognizes that his situation could be different and appreciates what he has been given. This negotiation also provides him with perspective on his place in the life-span.

Because of Grampa’s location in the life cycle, he is in a position to look both forward and back in time. This provides him with a perspective from which he can reflect on the people and experiences in his life as well as anticipate things to come in the future. While reflecting back on one’s life may not be uncommon in older age (Nussbaum et al., 2000) looking forward to things may be less common. Grampa knows that his future is “finite,” and “time-limited,” but he does not see his life as over just because he has reached old age. In fact, he continues to look forward to the years ahead. He is “determined” to continue living for the “benefit of others” as well as his own “personal enjoyment.” His negotiation of time as it relates to the life cycle results in the performance of an aging identity that includes reflection, gratitude, determination and anticipation of more “good years” ahead

Grampa’s negotiation and performance of age & aging show that he both adheres to and defies social standards. He views old age as an enjoyable accomplishment and

aging as tolerable and “better than the alternative.” This presentation of himself is constructed under dominant social ideologies as well as through his interaction with others. Closely related to both old age and aging is death which will be discussed below.

**Death.** The final aspect of this discussion of Grampa’s construction of an aging identity involves death. Grampa’s letters expose how the prospect of death plays a significant role in this construction. Grampa recognizes death as “the only alternative” to aging (1993\_1). It is clear from his references to and discussions of death that Grampa is aware of his own eventual death and appears to face it head on. He addresses death both directly and indirectly through explicit use of the words death and die, as well as using metaphorical expressions to allude to death. Each will be discussed in turn.

Many of Grampa’s letters deal with death directly and in a matter of fact way. As evidenced by research, people who are dying want to talk about it (Kubler-Ross, 1981). Grampa wants to talk about death because it is a very real phenomenon for him and his training as an estate attorney taught him the necessity of planning for eventual death. Though he was diagnosed with a fatal neurological disease, his experience of that disease was, atypically, a slow and gradual deterioration of his physical and mental abilities. Almost a decade passed between his diagnosis and his death, leaving him a substantial amount of time to talk about his eventual death. This is not to suggest that Grampa’s letters were consumed with thoughts on death and dying, instead, these references dotted the landscape of his corpus of letters, especially in the latter years.

Also during that time, many of Grampa’s friends and generational contemporaries died, providing him with more reason to talk about death and dying. This often was in

the form of condolence letters to the survivors of the deceased or in letters to mutual friends to inform of someone's death and/or Grampa's attendance at the deceased's funeral(s). Grampa's discussions of death evidence his negotiation of aging and its implications for his performances of identity. Though some of these references to death were direct and explicit, Grampa also employed linguistic metaphorical expressions to refer to death.

*Death through metaphor.* Grampa uses a variety of linguistic metaphors to refer to death in his letters. Linguistic metaphors are expressions that compare two seemingly unrelated concepts by explaining one thing in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). When using these linguistic metaphors, they typically fall under one of two categories: (a) expressions regarding the deaths of his generational contemporaries, and (b) expressions that refer to death itself. Grampa refers to his contemporaries as "dropping off like flies!" and, in a letter to a friend, states that Grampa hopes he can see that friend before one of them "conks out." These are just two of several metaphorical expressions used in his letters. Often, these expressions are tinged with humor, and indicate that Grampa is, to some extent, making light of the very real phenomena he and his generational contemporaries are facing. This is likely due in part to the societal taboos that surround talking about death (Cicirelli, 2006). Grampa may have felt the need to soften his references to death by referring to them implicitly and with humor.

Many of the linguistic expressions he uses indicate a sudden and abrupt end to life (e.g., dropping, conk), thus suggesting that Grampa is, at least partially, making sense of death through understanding the body as a machine and the belief that one day the



machine will simply stop working. Grampa's use of this type of language reflects a common metaphor found in masculinity literature that likens the body to a machine (Calasanti, 2004). As an atheist, Grampa did not believe in an afterlife. Given his perspective, it stands to reason that Grampa would understand death as the ceasing of all functioning.

Grampa's negotiation and performance of his aging identity is intricately tied to his awareness and knowledge of both his death and that of others. For example, the knowledge of his eventual death motivates Grampa to express himself in his letters. He is aware that he won't be able to express himself "from a coffin" and therefore shares thoughts and feelings with recipients that he might not have otherwise. Part of his ability to share these thoughts and feelings stems not just from his motivation to do so, but from the power dynamics mentioned earlier in this discussion. In many of his family relationships, Grampa's role puts him in a higher power position than that of his relational others. Combined with his awareness of the prospect of death, he feels he has the right and authority to share his opinions and feelings and instruct and advise people on personal matters.

In addition to self-expression, the prospect of death encourages Grampa to live a full life. He wants to "make good use" of the years he has "remaining" to him. Death is not something he is passively waiting for; instead, he wants to actively live while he can. While he is still in relatively good health, he wants to continue doing things he enjoys. He is painfully aware that many of his contemporaries are not in the position to do so, whether because of their own illness or death, or that of their spouses. For Grampa, the

fact that both he and Gramma are “still alive and able” is a privilege and an opportunity that many in their age cohort did not receive. Through this we see Grampa’s ability to assume the perspective of others and then actively and reflexively construct his own identity in response.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

Symbolic interaction and life-span communication provide the framework for understanding the findings of this study. Examining the findings through these theoretical lenses highlights that Grampa’s relationships, roles, age, aging, and the prospect of his eventual death all work together in the construction of his identity. Each represents an aspect of identity that informs the overall construction of his identity. He is a highly relational man whose relationship with his wife is intricately woven into his presentation of self. The importance of his relationships with a variety of other family members is evidenced through his referencing of those roles throughout his letters. Grampa’s age is fundamental to his identity as is the aging process. He finds both age and the process of aging to be predominantly enjoyable though they are not without their drawbacks. The physiological and social losses that he incurs over the 20 year span that the letters were written necessitate adaptation and evidence the continual reconstruction of identity. Finally, his cognizance of his eventual death informs not only his construction of identity but his communication with others. He is motivated to express himself and live fully while he is still able.

## **Chapter Six: Contributions and Conclusions**

### **Chapter Overview**

The findings from this study portray an older man who linguistically constructs his aging identity through personal letters written over the last two decades of his life. In contrast to societal ideals which depict aging as negative, Grampa's construction of identity is founded on positive perceptions of his older age and the aging process. In contrast to hegemonic masculinity ideals, his identity is intricately intertwined with the relationships in his life and the roles he fulfills therein. In this chapter, I discuss the strengths of this study by presenting three contributions the findings make to scholarship in aging and family communication. After discussing the strengths, I present the limitations of the study and discuss the directions to which they point for further research. In the final section of this chapter, I provide the rationale for and overview of a college level course that was inspired by this study.

### **Strengths and Contributions**

This dissertation makes a unique and significant contribution to the field of aging and family communication. The findings I have presented demonstrate that Grampa finds aging to be a predominantly positive experience and that he is highly relational. These findings are significant because they provide a new and productive perspective on three prevailing concerns related to aging males: (a) they advance our knowledge of a neglected population, (b) they present an antidote to the negative perceptions of aging

that permeate our society, and (c) they offer a competing or counter-narrative to our current understanding of older men in general, and the supposition that they have restricted relational lives in particular.

In an age when human beings are living longer than ever before, it is imperative that we uncover positive examples of aging men in order to articulate and legitimize their subjective experiences and relationships in later life. This study responds to the calls from scholars across the disciplines of aging and family communication, and aging and masculinity for more research that accentuates the positive aspects of aging, as well as the experiences of older men (Bates & Taylor, 2013; Dickson & Hughes, 2014; Harwood, et al., 2013; King & Calasanti, 2010; Tarrant, 2012).

In this section, I discuss the contributions this study makes to aging and family communication by incorporating relevant interdisciplinary literature from aging and masculinity—which includes scholarship from the fields of psychology, sociology, and social gerontology. I explicate the three major contributions this dissertation makes to the fields of aging and family communication.

**Aging males: Neglected in family communication.** Through the examination of the correspondence of a typically aging man, this dissertation extends the scarce knowledge of aging males in family communication. Aging and masculinity scholarship demonstrates that the roles and relationships that aging men engage in during later life significantly impact identity construction and may provide a space from which aging men can build acceptable masculine identity scripts (Spector-Mersel, 2006; Tarrant, 2012.) Though a growing body of research in aging and family communication examines the

relationships of older people, it reveals very little about the specific relational experiences of older men. As such, this study provides much needed insight into the experiences of a later life man.

In his own words, Grampa's letters portray an older man who constructs an identity that is based on positive perceptions of, and adaptation to, the aging process as well as an identity that is characterized by a multitude of relationships. In essence, his construction of identity reflects a caring and involved family man who enjoys growing old. These notions are in opposition to dominant perceptions of both masculinity and aging which suggest that men are not relationally oriented and that growing old is fraught with loneliness and decline (Mann, 2007; Dykstra, 2011). My findings indicate that older men are untapped resources who, through potentially significant and surprising insights into later life, may have the power to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity and nullify the negative perceptions of aging that permeate our culture.

**An antidote to negative perceptions of aging.** In stark contrast to existing social attitudes that construct aging as undesirable, this study presents a male identity that is based on primarily favorable perceptions of aging. Family scholars agree that more positive examples of aging people are needed to help dispel negative perceptions of aging (Dickson & Hughes, 2014; Harwood, et al., 2013). Previous focus on the pathological course of aging has resulted in the perpetuation of ageist attitudes which can negatively impact older people's identities, health, and mortality (Harwood, 2007; Levy, 2009; Nussbaum & Ohs, 2009; Pecchioni, et al., 2005). Grampa's letters provide an example of a man who finds aging fun, enjoyable, and "better than the alternative."

Grampa's letters challenge dominant perceptions of aging. Through the examination of the language Grampa uses throughout his letters, this study provides insight into Grampa's lived experience in his later years and reflects his construction of an aging identity as one founded on positive perceptions of growing old. Though the presentation of his identity includes aspects of loss and decline (e.g., deterioration of physical abilities), this study highlights Grampa's pride in his age and the aging process, and the good fortune he feels to be able to grow old. Grampa's correspondence illustrates his ability to adapt with the changes and challenges that he experiences and his ability to maintain a positive outlook despite the deterioration he is also experiencing.

The two conceptual metaphors that emerge from Grampa's letters: (a) aging is a blessing of time and (b) aging is a tolerable inconvenience—show Grampa's thoughts of aging as predominantly upbeat, though not without its drawbacks. There are two primary reasons Grampa perceived aging as mostly positive. First, he views aging as an accomplishment. He is glad to have reached particular chronological ages and perceives the attainment of them as reaching a desired goal. Each birthday marks another accomplishment that Grampa is "determined" to enjoy both "for the benefit of others," and for his own "personal enjoyment." Second, aging is enjoyable for Grampa because he and his wife are "still able" to engage in activities that bring them pleasure and Grampa feels "lucky" for this.

Grampa's letters contribute to the study of aging and family communication by presenting evidence of the positive attributes of an aging identity while not ignoring the negative aspects. They provide a realistic view of the construction of this aging male

identity which, in addition to being constructed as primarily favorable, is also constructed in relationship to the people in his life. Grampa's letters provide an antidote to negative perceptions of aging by demonstrating that aging men may find older age to be a rich and rewarding time in their lives, replete with pleasant experiences and meaningful relationships (Alex, et al., 2008).

**A counter-narrative: Older men enjoy relationality.** The corpus of Grampa's letters examined in this study offers an example of a man who values and works hard to maintain a variety of relationships in his later years. The lack of literature on older men, combined with the scant findings that are found within studies that merge the experiences of men and women, paints a picture of older men as relationally deficient and incapable or undesiring of forming and maintaining relationships on their own (Bates, 2009; Mann, 2007; Tarrant, 2012). The sheer magnitude of Grampa's letters, combined with the multitude of recipients, is evidence of the effort he puts into maintaining connections with the people he cares about and demonstrates that he desired to continue communication with them well into his later years. This study contributes to our understanding of the relationality of older men in two main areas, family relationships and friendships.

***Family relationships.*** Grampa's letters demonstrate that a wide variety of family relationships are important to him. The most important relationship that emerges is that with his wife, Gramma Sadie. Research suggests that marriage is beneficial for the majority of older adults (Dickson & Hughes, 2014; Mares & Fitzpatrick, 2004). In specific regard to men, research suggests that married men benefit more from marriage

due in part to a reliance on their wives' social network upon retirement from the work force (Harwood, et al., 2013). Grampa's letters both support and contradict extant research. In one letter, Grampa describes his marriage as a "happy, happy union!" which exemplifies the fact that he finds his marriage to be highly satisfying. In addition, his perception that aging is a blessing is due in part to the fact that both he and Gramma Sadie are alive, in relatively good health, and able to continue doing the things they enjoy doing *together*. For Grampa, his overall happiness is as dependent on Gramma's well-being as well as his own.. It is evident that Grampa finds his marriage and his relationship with his wife satisfying and beneficial to his own experience of aging.

Contrary to previous indications regarding the relational lives of older men, Grampa's social network does not derive from his wife's social network. Whether with family or friends, Grampa expends tremendous effort to maintain the relationships that he has cultivated throughout his life. Grampa's letters serve as an example of an older man who is not only highly relational, but fosters those relationships of his own desire and volition. Thus, Grampa's marriage is extremely influential in his life and an integral aspect of his identity, but it does not serve as the sole source of his social network in his later years.

Grampa's social network is comprised of several family relationships in addition to that with his wife. Emerging research examines the significance of both the grandfather and uncle roles for men. Findings indicate that these roles are important to the men who fulfill them as well as to the families in which they belong (Bates & Goodsell, 2013; Milardo, 2014). An important dimension of these roles is generativity



which suggests that men may actively work towards the development of future generations (Bates, 2009; Milardo, 2005). Grampa's letters reflect the significance these two roles held for him. They are an integral part of his negotiation and performance of identity throughout his letters as are other family roles and relationships.

This study extends family scholarship by revealing that a variety of other roles are important to Grampa as well as those just mentioned. His use of referencing terms throughout the letters indicates that, in addition to being a husband, grandfather, and uncle, the roles of father, brother, and cousin are also of significant import to his identity. Each of these emerges as salient in his overall presentation of self. However, very little is known about aging men in these roles and the significance they might hold for constructing an aging male identity. Grampa's letters suggest that aging men might find tremendous meaning in and through a wide variety of roles and relationships.

As evidenced, Grampa's letters reveal that he works vigorously to maintain the relationships in his life. In addition, he also cultivates relationships between and among family members. As such, Grampa's letters establish him as a family kinkeeper, a role typically associated with women in the family (Segrin & Flora, 2011). Kinkeepers in families provide information to and about family members, transmit family history and traditions, and maintain and foster relationships between and among other family members (Leach & Braithwaite, 1996). The letters themselves are a form of kin-keeping as they keep Grampa in communication with his recipients over a significant period of time. They also encourage communication between and among recipients by updating recipients on mutual family members and friends, and encouraging them to contact and

communicate with one another. Many of Grampa's letters are addressed to multiple recipients (e.g., to his children, grandchildren, and sisters), thereby putting each of the recipients into a form of interaction with the others. Throughout the collection, Grampa's negotiation and performance of identity involves, as he says in one letter, "keeping the family ties."

***Friendship.*** In addition to family relationships, Grampa's letters reflect a social network that includes many friendships which remain important and vital to Grampa well into his later years. Scholarship suggests that friendships have a significant and positive effect on older adults (Nussbaum & Ohs, 2009; Stevens & VanTilburg, 2011). They provide varying kinds of support and can serve to confirm changing identities in later life (Pecchioni, et al., 2005; Stevens & VanTilburg, 2011). Many of Grampa's friendships were long standing, though some were developed in his retirement years. His letters evidence the substantial effort he invested in maintaining those friendships throughout his later years. A simple yet profound example of the importance of friendship in Grampa's life is the last letter in Grampa's collection, which was written to several close friends and explains his lack of communication as a result of his deteriorating health. At the end of his life, and, in many cases, after decades of friendship, he wants his friends to know that he is thinking of them and wishing them well. Grampa's letters suggest that friendships are a salient aspect of an aging male identity and can remain strong and vital well into older age.

**Summary.** The strengths of this study provide several contributions to scholarship in the field of aging and family communication. First, the findings from my

study advance knowledge of a neglected population in family communication—aging men—that is a growing and cherished part of our society as well as our families. Second, Grampa's letters defy the socially derived negative perceptions of aging by evidencing an older identity that is constructed by primarily positive aspects. Third, Grampa was a highly relational man who constructed himself as a caring and involved family member to whom a variety of relational roles are highly salient. In connection with his relationality, Grampa's letters and the contents therein establish him as a family kinkeeper. The strengths of this study have much to offer the fields of aging and family and interpersonal communication, but they also point to the limitations of this study and directions for future research.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This dissertation offers several unique contributions to the scholarship in aging and family communication, but there are still many questions about aging masculine identities that remain unanswered. All research has limitations; thus, rather than viewing these unanswered questions as a shortcoming of this study, I see them as opportunities for future research. In this section, I discuss three limitations of my study and offer suggestions for corresponding directions for future research to redress these limitations. First, my study does not reveal the impact specific family roles have on identity and how the performance of identity within those roles might change over the course of one's life. Second, Grampa's letters do not tell us how he perceived his masculinity in comparison to societal ideals and if, or how, the performance of that masculinity may have changed

over the course of his life. Third, this study may only be representative of those men with similar backgrounds and relational histories as Grampa.

**Relational Roles.** The first limitation of this study is that it does not reveal how the individual roles that Grampa fulfilled impact his identity. While the study evidences the importance of a variety of relational roles in Grampa's presentation of self, the findings do not indicate what each of those roles means to him and his construction of identity. We know that being a husband, father, grandfather, uncle, cousin, and brother held great significance for Grampa, but we do not know how he made sense of those roles independent from one another. What did it mean to Grampa to be an uncle? What did it mean to be a cousin? Not only do we not know what it meant to Grampa to fulfill these roles, we do not know how his performance of identity might have changed between and among those roles.

We know that family roles are inevitably intertwined with one another (Pecchioni, et al., 2005), but did Grampa's performance of identity change among his recipients? For example, did his enactment of his role change when he was writing to his nieces and nephews versus when he was writing to his grandchildren? In this study, I conducted two linguistic analyses that trace the construction of Grampa's identity over time and across the collection of letters; however, I did not examine his performance of identity within individual relationships. Analyzing the letters according to the individual relationships therein would likely provide a deeper understanding of the aging male identity Grampa constructs by speaking to the characteristics and interactions in specific, individual family relationships (e.g., older adult siblings, older father-adult children relationships).

This line of research could be further developed to include not only looking at Grampa's interaction in individual relationships, but how that interaction might have changed over the course of the collection of letters. This study does not analyze Grampa's performance of identity in individual roles, nor does it address if or how that performance might have changed over the years. Just as his performance of identity likely changed between roles, it also likely changed as he grew older. A key feature of life span perspective is that people become more communicatively adept as they age based on the accumulation of experiences and history of interpersonal interactions (Pecchioni, et al., 2005). Grampa's communication within individual roles and relationships probably changed as he continued to age but that is not evident in the current study.

The first limitation offers suggestions for future research using Grampa's letters as a data source, but it also suggests future research for other family communication researchers. Another key tenet of life-span communication is that people change over the course of their lives as circumstances and relationships change (Pecchioni, et al., 2005). While Grampa's letters are a rare and unique collection—given their physical existence, the sizeable number of recipients, and the time span they cover—the research corpus only began when Grampa was 69. Thus, they do not tell us how his enactment of identity might have changed from younger adulthood to middle adulthood and then into later life. As a result of the time span the letters encompass, we do not know how his negotiation and performance of identity may have changed through, or from, his earlier stages of life.

A productive avenue for future research might include longitudinal studies that investigate how men's relationships and identities change over the course of their lifespan. Grampa's letters demonstrate that he was an extremely relational man who was motivated to express his thoughts and feelings in his later life. They do not tell us if or how this is different from when he was younger. For instance, aging and the prospect of death are dominant concepts in his letters that serve as motivation for his self-expression, but likely would not have been as salient in Grampa's earlier life stages. Research that traces the lives of men as they age and how their relational worlds change and impact their identities could be of great value in family communication. Grampa's letters suggest that there may be highly relational men in our families who place a great deal of importance on their family relationships and the roles they enact within those relationships. It is vital that family communication address this.

**Masculinity.** The second limitation of this study is that Grampa's letters do not tell us how he perceived his own masculinity in comparison to societal ideals and if or how the performance of that masculinity may have changed over the course of his life. While we can infer ideas and interpretations about Grampa's masculine identity from his letters, he rarely directly referenced being male or masculine in his letters. As such, we do not know how Grampa was impacted by hegemonic ideals or how he negotiated those ideals in his own performance of masculinity as he grew older. Research suggests that men's performance of a masculine identity changes as they age and that they may become more emotionally expressive and relationally oriented (Dickson & Walker, 2001; Tarrant, 2012). Grampa's performance of identity includes emotional expression and

relationality, but it is not clear from his letters whether this was different than his performance of identity in his younger years.

As a result, it is important to investigate how masculinity is (re)constructed as men age and find themselves in changing life circumstances. Hummert (2007) states that “interdisciplinary research offers us the most promise of illuminating the many complex issues in human aging and communication” (p. 16). Family communication scholarship could benefit from the interdisciplinary scholarship within the field of aging and masculinity. Many of the studies in aging and masculinity utilize symbolic interaction and discuss family roles. Scholarship in this area has begun to provide a sketch of the older husband taking care of his wife, and the widower who has lost his wife. Communication plays a crucial role in these situations as men have to negotiate roles that were historically inhabited by women.

In addition, a productive line of research could include longitudinal studies that examine how men’s masculine identities change over time in ordinary circumstances. As evidenced in this study, aging men may be more focused on relationships and the family than previously thought (Pecchioni, et al., 2005). Their identities may be impacted by the prospect of their eventual death and this, in turn, may impact their relationships. Later life men may struggle to construct an identity that is in contrast to the hegemonic scripts that no longer apply to them (Spector-Mersel, 2006). At the foundation of all of this is communication. Thus, it is vitally important that the field of family communication expand its purview to include aging men, their masculinities, and their relational lives in its scholarship.

**Positionality.** Another limitation of the findings in this dissertation involves Grampa's positionality. Grampa was a White, married man with children, grandchildren, and an extended family. He was in the upper socioeconomic class and an atheist who was experiencing normative aging and considered himself to be in relatively good health. Thus, his letters may only be representative of men with similar backgrounds, health status, and relational networks. The findings in this study may not apply to aging men of other ethnicities, from different socioeconomic classes and religious backgrounds, or those who have different relational networks.

The various markers of Grampa's identity afford him high levels of privilege in our society. Being White and married are both valued in our culture and provide Grampa with particular social experiences as a result. In addition, Grampa's educational and socioeconomical statuses offer him further experiences of privilege based on his attainment of cultural values such as a high level of education and the amassment of financial resources. These intersecting identities impact Grampa's experiences, and therefore his subsequent understanding of the world. Metaphors are enabled and constrained by our experiences of culture. The metaphors that are unearthed in this study are influenced by these layers of privilege and access that Grampa experienced. Men with differing backgrounds and relational histories may produce different metaphors based on different experiences in society.

As a result, future research should examine the later lives of men from a variety of backgrounds and relational histories. For example, how do men without families, in the traditional sense, construct family? In other words, how do men who have never been



married or had children construct family? Exciting and promising research on voluntary kin is helping to expand definitions of family and demonstrates that people who are single may construct their own family through social networks (Braithwaite et al., 2010). Research suggests that men who have never been married have the most limited social networks (Thompson & Whearty, 2004). This may be due in part to traditional conceptions of masculinity and aging men having to construct identities within confines that do not promote relational ties. Changing conceptions of what it means to be old and a man may have profound impact on those men who have never been married. Thus, further research into aging men who do not fit the normative definitions of family is warranted.

In addition, research that includes participants from a variety of ethnicities and backgrounds is crucial to understanding the multitude of ways that aging men enact an aging masculinity. Masculinity and aging scholars contend that aging men face a variety of intersecting identities that impact the construction of an aging identity. Varying intersections of age, class, race, and sexuality impact the construction of identity for older men (King & Calasanti, 2013). Research that investigates these varying systems of inequality and the consequences for older men will be important in understanding future generations of aging men.

A final limitation of this study is my researcher bias. As Grampa's granddaughter, it is likely difficult for me to see the potential dark side to Grampa's presentation of self in his letters. Research on the dark side of relationships suggests that negativity is inherent in all relationships in some way (Perlman & Carcedo, 2010). Even

in primarily positive relationships, there exists tension and conflict that is a normal part of relating with other people. The fact that any conflicts and tensions are not uncovered may be due to my bias as Grampa's granddaughter. It is with this bias in mind that I aimed to establish validity through keeping a reflexive journal, using exemplars in the analyses, creating an audit trail, and utilizing peer reviewers. To address this bias in future study of Grampa's letters, I could work with research partners to analyze and interpret findings as well as continuing to take steps to achieve validity.

### **Practical Application**

There are several ways the findings from this study might prove beneficial for others. They could inform family counselors working with aging families, particularly the men in those families. The findings might be of import to gerontologists in working with older men in a variety of situations and contexts. For my purposes and expertise, the results of this study have inspired the idea for a college level course in aging and family communication, specifically as it pertains to older men within families. The goals of the course are to deepen understanding and awareness of older men in society and in families as well as foster meaningful intergenerational communication and relationships. Below, I discuss relevant literature that supports the idea of fostering intergenerational relationships and communication through college courses. Then I provide an overview of my ideas for this course.

Previous research suggests that undergraduate courses which foster contact between younger students and older adults are beneficial for both parties (Shedletsky, 2012; Weber & Absher, 2003). Shedletsky (2006, 2010) has created college courses in

which college students mentor older adults and provide training on internet skills.

Shedletsky (2010) reports that both younger and older adults learn from one another in these courses. Older adults increased their computer efficacy and reported enjoying the interaction with the younger adults (Shedletsky, 2006). Through journal entries, the younger adults indicated that their attitudes about older people had changed as a result of the course (Shedletsky, 2010).

In a specifically family focused assignment, Weber and Absher (2003) had college students in a gerontology course work with one of their grandparents on a memory box assignment. If a grandparent wasn't available, the instructors of the course paired students with a grandparent from the local community. This assignment consisted of having the students interview the grandparents to find out what types of things grandparents would put in a fictitious memory box for their grandchildren. Weber & Absher (2003) report that the assignment was beneficial for both students and grandparents. It enabled students to understand issues they were discussing in class and the importance of intergenerational relationships, especially their own role within those relationships. Grandparents expressed gratitude and excitement about being able to talk about things that were important to them (Weber & Absher).

The instructors who created these classes and assignments encourage other instructors to create similar classes and assignments because of the positive impact they have on both the college students and the older adults (Shedletsky, 2010; Weber & Absher, 2003). The outcomes of these classes support intergroup contact theory which suggests that contact between younger adults and older adults may improve perceptions

of older adults. In communication, research on grandparent-grandchild relationships indicates that there is a connection between relationships with grandparents and the grandchildren's perceptions of older adults in general (Harwood, Hewstone, Paolini, & Voci, 2005). The two classes described above, however, indicate that contact with older adults who are not family members may also improve younger adults' perceptions.

The course I am envisioning seeks to promote awareness and understanding of older men in society and in families and engender meaningful intergenerational relationships by encouraging communication between college students and older men in families. Ideally, college students would work with their own grandfather or perhaps an older uncle to complete assignments and accomplish course goals. However, working with an older male family member may not be an option for some students. In those instances, I would recruit older men from the local community who would be willing to volunteer to work with the college student. I would work with local community organizations, senior centers, and active living communities to recruit older male participants who are grandfathers or uncles.

Students would work with the older adult males over the duration of the course to complete a memory box assignment as adapted from Weber & Absher (2003). They would also be required to complete responses for the assigned weekly readings. The students would be required to write a letter at the end of the semester to their older adult male partner. They would have relative freedom to decide on the content of the letter, though the assignment would ask them to comment on their experiences with the older adult male. Finally, students would be required to complete a final paper and present it to

the class. This paper would connect the readings from the course to their own experiences with their older male partner.

As a dedicated communication teacher, I am committed to helping my students improve and maintain interpersonal relationships. I am excited to share the lessons I have learned from Grampa with future students and have been inspired to fully develop this course and include it with this dissertation. As a result, a detailed syllabus (Appendix A), description of the memory box assignment (Appendix B), and course reading list (Appendix C) are included at the end of this dissertation. I hope to build from and enhance these in many iterations of this course over the years.

## **Conclusion**

This dissertation has been an arduous and exhilarating journey that began with an idea that Grampa's letters might hold academic significance. Through the painstaking, and often heartbreaking, process of reading them, I began to realize what a rich source of inspiration and illumination they held for understanding the construction of an aging male identity. I ventured into interdisciplinary territories that informed my understanding of the intersections of aging, masculinity, and personal relationships, and how those merge in the construction of identity. The language Grampa used in the letters served as the vehicle through which I was able to explore these intersections. Using thematic and metaphoric analyses allowed me to remain rooted in Grampa's own words as I analyzed and interpreted his language and uncovered the dominant themes and metaphors that shaped his thinking and his experiences. Symbolic interaction and life span communication laid the groundwork for interpreting my findings and explaining their

meanings. The findings reveal a highly relational identity that is indelibly shaped by age and the aging process. As such, they offer three important contributions to family communication by depicting an older man who enjoyed aging and found tremendous meaning in and through a variety of relationships. While the study offers much to our understanding of aging men, it leaves many questions unanswered. The questions generated by the examination of Grampa's letters point to directions for future research which will further illuminate this understudied, but deeply cherished, part of our society and our families

## **Epilogue**

While reading Grampa's letters, I laughed out loud and cried many tears. In my mind's eye, I could see the twinkle in his eye when using humor, and his look of focused concentration when writing about something serious. I heard his voice in my head as I read page after page of his words on paper. His letters are an expression of him and they are precious to me. When I told him I was going to use his letters as the basis for my dissertation, he raised his eyebrows and briefly shook his head. With a slight wave of his hand, he told me I could use anything I needed to. I could tell from his expression and the tone of his voice that he couldn't imagine they would have any significance to anyone outside of his family.

Many years before he died, Grampa and I had a conversation about his eventual death and what his beliefs were about an afterlife. As a self-described atheist, I knew Grampa didn't believe in God or Heaven and I wanted to know what he did believe. He told me that, to him, afterlife was the way he would live on in the minds of his successors after his death. He said that he lived his life in a way that he hoped would leave an example for his children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews, and those of his close friends. He felt that the way he was remembered by people would be his lasting legacy and he aspired—in life—to embody the ideals he felt important to pass on to the people he loved.

Perhaps that is part of the reason he saved this collection of letters when he cleaned out his study before moving into a senior living community just a few years prior to his death. I believe Grampa had the foresight to know that we, his family, would be responsible for the two drawer filing cabinet that contained his personal correspondence once he died. Grampa treasured the letters and other memorabilia that he had from his parents and may have hoped that someone in his family would feel the same way about his letters. However, I think Grampa would be bewildered and humbled to know that his letters have the potential to influence people beyond those in his family and close circle of friends. They add to an academic field which has the power to change lives and influence society for generations to come.

Of all Grampa's influential teachings in my life, his lessons about aging have become increasingly profound through the writing of this dissertation. Grampa's letters, without question, have provided me with a deep and nuanced understanding of aging that has influenced my perceptions of aging beyond those that I learned from Grampa and his generational contemporaries while they were still alive. It has deepened my desire to grow old gracefully *and* gratefully and to encourage this philosophy in my daughter. I share Grampa's legacy of letters with you in the hope that you will be inspired to do the same.



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## Appendix A

### Welcome!

#### Aging and Masculinity

#### Syllabus

Instructor: Tiffani Baldwin

### Course Objectives

This course is designed to increase your knowledge and awareness of aging men in society and in families. The objectives for this course are twofold. The first objective is to facilitate an academic understanding of older men and masculinity. Through engagement with relevant scholarship, we will explore the intersections of age and masculinity and how they impact the identity construction of older men. The second objective is to engender meaningful intergenerational communication and relationships. Through engagement with family or community members, you will be encouraged to develop and/or deepen a relationship with an aging man.

### Course Philosophy

As an instructor, I am committed to creating an inviting atmosphere in which my students can openly share and express diverging thoughts and worldviews. I expect each and every student to play an active part in creating this atmosphere. Discussions regarding gender and sex can be difficult for a variety of reasons. We have all had various life experiences as a result of our genders that, in many cases, will not be the same as even those of the same sex. It is imperative that we always treat each other with respect and dignity. Any behavior to the contrary will not be tolerated. Remember that this is a learning environment in which we will explore new ideas. Your classmates are sophisticated listeners with diverse thoughts and viewpoints – I expect that you will act and prepare accordingly.

### Course Requirements

#### *Attendance/Class Participation* (Worth 10% of total grade)

You are expected to arrive on time to class prepared to actively participate in class activities and discussions. You will make a unique and meaningful contribution to our learning community by: critically engaging with the readings, formulating intelligent questions and clarifying concepts during discussions, listening mindfully to your peers, completing thoughtful and intelligent written assignments, delivering well-prepared speeches, and providing constructive peer feedback. When you are not in class your opportunities to teach, learn, and interact with your peers are diminished.

You will earn points for each class in which you attend ***and*** actively participate. If you miss class, I will assume that you have an important reason; therefore, you do not need to provide an explanation. If, however, special circumstances arise that prohibit you from attending class on a regular basis, please contact me immediately.

Due to the interactive nature of this course, tardiness and early departures from class can be disruptive and disrespectful to your peers. I will subtract points each time you are late for class or leave early. In addition, if you are more than 15 minutes late for class or leave more than 15 minutes early, you will be marked absent. Each class period I will pass around a dated sign-up sheet where you will print and sign your name to record your attendance.

### ***Reading Assignments***

All reading assignments listed on the course schedule are required and must be read by the date listed. You are expected to closely read every assigned article and come to class prepared to discuss what you have read. You are not required to agree with the authors of the readings, however, it is required that you critically engage with the material presented by the authors.

### ***Written Assignments***

All written assignments are due at the beginning of class on the dates indicated in the course schedule. Unless indicated otherwise, all written assignments must be typed using a 12-point Times New Roman font, black ink, and margins set at 1 inch. ***Handwritten assignments will not be accepted, and written assignments may not be submitted via e-mail without instructor permission.***

### ***Course Communication***

All course communication will utilize the University email and/or Blackboard systems. Please check both regularly.

### ***Grading Policy***

I view the classroom as a professional domain in which high quality work is expected and rewarded. All work will be evaluated based on the objectives and grading criteria provided to you for each assignment or activity. I am available via e-mail to discuss any questions you have about assignments.

### **Course Assignments and Grades**

#### **Memory box assignment (worth 30%)**

This assignment requires you to work with an older male partner (65+) throughout the quarter. Ideally, your older male partner would be a family member, such as a grandfather, or an uncle. If a family member is not feasible or available, I will work with you to find a partner. This assignment will require you to be in contact with your older male partner several times throughout the quarter. This communication can take place in person (when possible) or via telephone and/or email. This assignment is broken into three parts: 1) Initial contact and general information about partner, course, and assignment, 2) first half of “interview questions” regarding a fictitious memory box, and 3) second half of “interview questions” regarding memory box (see attached assignment sheet).

#### Reading responses (worth 20%)

There will be a total of eight (8) response papers due over the quarter. Each week, you will need to come to class prepared to discuss that week's readings. To facilitate these discussions, you will need to write 1-2 page responses to the readings. In these responses, you can do several things: 1) pose questions that the readings left you wondering, 2) work through ideas or concepts that are unclear to you, 3) articulate what is particularly profound or powerful to you in the readings, and/or 4) tie the content in the readings to your experiences with your older male partner. The reading responses will provide a platform from which you can write your final paper for this class.

#### Letter to older male partner (worth 10%)

Upon completion of the memory box assignment, you will be asked to write a letter to your older male partner. The letter can be typed, but it cannot be an email—you will need to send it through the US Postal Service. In this letter, please express to your older male partner how your experiences with him and this class have impacted you. Part of this should be thanking him for taking the time to work with you over the duration of the course. You are free to say anything you like to your older male partner, but keep in mind that I will be reading the letter so use caution if there is anything that should remain private between the two of you (you can always send a separate letter!). This assignment will be further discussed later in the quarter.

#### Final paper (worth 25%)

The final paper in this class will be a culmination of the course readings and your experiences with your older male partner. You can use your response papers as you craft this paper. The paper should synthesize and summarize what you have learned from the readings and how they connect to your experiences with your older male partner. In particular, you will need to include what you have learned about aging and masculinity as well as intergenerational communication. In addition, you will want to comment on how working with your older male partner helped facilitate this learning. This assignment will be further discussed later in the quarter.

#### Present final paper to class (worth 5%)

Each student will present their final paper to the class in the last week of the quarter. These presentations will be fairly informal, though I expect that you will be thoroughly prepared for them. Please do not read your final papers to us, instead provide us with an overview of how the readings and your experiences with your older male partner have informed your understanding of aging, masculinity, identity, and intergenerational relationships.

## Appendix B

### Memory Box Assignment

*Adapted from Weber & Absher (2003)*

This assignment will be developed over the course of the quarter. It requires that you communicate with your older male partner at least three (3) times during the quarter. For this assignment, you will ask your older male partner a series of questions and then write up his answers for submission to me. You will essentially be interviewing your older male partner, but these can be informal interviews that take a conversational form. They do not need to be recorded or transcribed, though you will want to take detailed notes of his answers for the written part of this assignment. The written assignment must follow the guidelines set forth in the syllabus and will include the answers to the questions below as well as any other information that is pertinent to this assignment and the objectives of this course. Importantly, I expect you to include how this assignment is furthering your understanding of older men, masculinity, and intergenerational communication and relationships. (Further detail provided in class)

This purpose of this assignment is to ask your older male partner to create a fictitious memory box for one of his grandchildren. You will ask him questions about what he would include in this memory box and why. I will provide you with five (5) questions to guide your conversations with your older male partner about this memory box; however, you are free to ask other questions and gather other information as is appropriate for the relationship between you and your older male partner.

#### Part 1 (due 3<sup>rd</sup> week of quarter – 10% of assignment grade)

The first part of this assignment will be an introductory conversation in which you gather some basic information about your older male partner and provide him with an overview of the course and this assignment. In this initial “interview” you will also provide your older male partner with the questions that you will want him to answer in the following two interviews.

Questions during this first part include:

- 1) Your older male partner’s age and the age he first became a grandparent
- 2) Total number of grandchildren
- 3) Ages and gender of grandchildren
- 4) Which grandchild is the memory box being created for? Please explain why.

#### Part 2 (due 6<sup>th</sup> week of quarter – 10% of assignment grade)

The second part of this assignment involves asking the first two questions specific to what your older male partner would include in his memory box. Use the questions as a guideline and allow for conversation to develop as appropriate.

Questions:

- 1) What would you like to share with your grandchild about his/her family history? Please explain why.
- 2) What one thing/item would you like to give to your grandchild to remember you by? Please explain.

Part 3 (due 9<sup>th</sup> week of quarter – 10% of assignment grade)

This last part of the memory box assignment signifies the completion of this assignment. You will ask your older male partner the remaining three questions, again using the questions as a guideline but allowing for further conversation to develop.

Questions:

- 1) What term or value best describes your role in your grandchild's life? Please explain.
- 2) What is the one story you have told, or would like to tell your grandchild that you would like him or her to remember the most? Please explain.
- 3) What advice would you like to give your grandchild? Please explain.

## Appendix C

### Aging and Masculinity Reading List

#### Week 2 – Gender and Aging Masculinity

Spector-Mersel, G. (2006). Never-aging stories: Western hegemonic masculinity scripts.

*Journal of Gender Studies*, 15(1), 67-82. doi: 10.1080/09589230500486934

Thompson, E. H. (2006). Images of old men's masculinity: Still a man? *Sex Roles*, 55, 633-648.

doi: 10.1007/s11199-006-9119-7

West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & society*, 1, 125-151.

doi: 10.1177/0891243287001002002

This week's reading are designed to establish gender as a performative accomplishment and introduce how gender is perceived in and performed by aging men.

#### Week 3 – Language and Identity

Bennett, K. M. (2007). "No sissy stuff": Towards a theory of masculinity and emotional expression in older widowed men. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 21, 347-356.

Galvin, K. M., (2006). Diversity's impact on defining the family. In L.H. Turner & R. West

(Eds.), *The family communication sourcebook* (pp. 3-19). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

van den Hoonaard, D. (2009). Widowers' strategies of self-representation during research interviews : A sociological analysis. *Ageing and Society*, 29, 257-276.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X08007721>

This week's readings will provide the platform from which we will explore the role of language in the construction of identity, particularly older men's masculine identity. Though the Galvin piece deals specifically with family identity, I think it is a clear example of the way people use language (e.g., names, labels) to affirm or deny marginalized identities.

#### Week 4 – Ageism and Stereotypes

Levy, B. R. (2003). Mind matters: Cognitive and physical effects of aging self-stereotypes. *The*

*Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 58(4),

P203-P211. doi: 10.1093/geronb/58.4.P203

Levy, B. (2009). Stereotype embodiment A psychosocial approach to aging. *Current Directions*

*in Psychological Science*, 18, 332-336. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8721.2009.01662.x

North, M. S., & Fiske, S. T. (2012). An inconvenienced youth? ageism and its potential intergenerational roots. *Psychological Bulletin*, 138, 982. doi: [10.1037/a0027843](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027843)

This week's readings provide an understanding of ageism and how it impacts older people's construction of identity as well as their physical and cognitive abilities. The articles introduce the idea of age stereotypes, which are typically learned at very young ages, becoming internalized and impacting the way people handle their own aging process over the lifecourse.

#### Week 5 – Intergenerational Communication

Hummert, M. L. (2010). Age group identity, age stereotypes, and communication in a life span

context. In H. Giles, S. Reid, & J. Harwood (Eds.), *The dynamics of intergroup communication* (pp. 41-52). New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Soliz, J. E. & Lin, MC. (2014). Communication in grandparent-grandchild relationships. In K.

Floyd & M. T. Morman (Eds.), *Widening the family circle* (pp. 35-50). Los Angeles:

Sage.

This week's readings introduce fundamentals of intergenerational communication and the factors that impact that communication. In addition, it includes a specific focus on communication in grandparent-grandchild relationships which will serve as a springboard for the next week's readings on grandfathers, masculinity, and identity.

#### Week 6 – Grandfathers and Masculine Identity

Mann, R. (2007). Out of the shadows?: Grandfatherhood, age and masculinities. *Journal of*

*Aging Studies*, 21, 281-291. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2007.05.008>

Mann, R., & Leeson, G. (2010). Grandfathers in contemporary families in Britain: Evidence

from qualitative research. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, 8, 234-248.

doi: 10.1080/15350770.2010.498774

Sorensen, P., & Cooper, N. J. (2010). Reshaping the family man: A grounded theory study of the

meaning of grandfatherhood. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 18, 117-136.

doi: 10.3149/jms.1802.117

This week's readings examine how the role of grandfather provides a space in which older men can (re)construct an aging masculinity that is often in contrast to hegemonic masculinity.

#### Week 7 – Grandfathers in Relationships

Bates, J. S. (2009). Generative grandfathering: A conceptual framework for nurturing grandchildren. *Marriage & Family Review*, 45(4), 331-352.

Bates, J. S., & Goodsell, T. L. (2013). Male kin relationships: Grandfathers, grandsons, and generativity. *Marriage & Family Review*, 49(1), 26-50.



This week's readings continue our examination of the grandfather role and identity by exploring grandfathers relationships with grandchildren and how those relationships impact the construction of masculine identity.

Week 8 – Letter Writing and Relationships

Miller, K. I. (2008). My father and his father: An analysis of world war II correspondence.

*Journal of Family Communication*, 8(2), 148-165. doi: 10.1080/15267430701857349

Haggis, J., & Holmes, M. (2011). Epistles to Emails: Letters, relationship building and the

virtual age. *Life Writing*, 8, 169-185. doi: 10.1080/14484528.2011.559733  
This week's readings convey the function of letters in the creation of masculine identity as well as their interpersonal functions. These readings provide a platform for the letter writing assignment.