



Published in final edited form as:

J Gerontol Soc Work. 2014 ; 57(0): 161–175. doi:10.1080/01634372.2013.855287.

Gender Transitions in Later Life: The Significance of Time in Queer Aging

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Abstract

Concepts of time are ubiquitous in studies of aging. This article integrates an existential perspective on time with a notion of queer time based on the experiences of older transgender persons who contemplate or pursue a gender transition in later life. Interviews were conducted with male-to-female identified persons aged 50 years or older (N=22), along with participant observation at three national transgender conferences (N=170 hours). Interpretive analyses suggest that an awareness of “time left to live” and a feeling of “time served” play a significant role in later life development and help expand gerontological perspectives on time and queer aging.

Keywords

GLBT populations; GLBT issues; gender; qualitative

Time, in all its conceptualizations and utilities, is an essential component of thinking about age and aging. The field of gerontology, with its varied topical domains and disciplinary traditions, offers a diverse space in which critical discussions and debates about the role of time in aging research and implications for its theorizing may be generated. This article addresses the intersection of an existential and queer perspective on time and aging across the life course. The aim is to interpret narratives about gender transitions in later life by integrating these two perspectives and generating implications for gerontological social work.

Empirical and theoretical work in gerontology has been criticized for the ways in which queer identities and experiences are marginalized (Brown, 2009). In parallel fashion, the field of queer studies has been criticized for a lack of empirical and theoretical research on aging (Sandberg, 2008). In response to these deficits in knowledge development, critical approaches to “queer aging” are now being explored (Hughes, 2006). While it may be daunting to think about integrating the expansive and evolving fields of gerontology and queer studies, this article addresses one key concept rooted in the human experience – time – that is considered in both domains. I explore the experiences and reflections upon time, identity, and action in the lives of older transgender-identified persons in hopes of contributing insight into the ways in which queer identities construct meanings of aging.

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¹All names in this paper are pseudonyms and details have been changed to protect participants’ confidentiality

Time, Gerontology and Queer Theory

In gerontological realms, chronological time has often been the dominant conceptualization of time (Baars, 1998). Often, chronological metrics play a central role in research design and subsequent theorizing, which diminishes opportunities for examining nuanced temporalities at play in aging and identity development (Baars, 2007). In reaction to this reliance on chronological time, Baars proposes that greater attention be paid to subjective aspects of identity construction, in which personal narratives help elucidate diverse experiences and contribute to an expansion of cultural representations of aging. For example, human beings of the same chronological age can show very different aging characteristics; therefore we cannot assume that aging processes develop in synchrony with chronological time, or that cohorts of older adults will consist of homogenous identities (p. 3). In this vein, Dittmann-Kohli (2007) argues that taking an *existential time perspective*, based on the assumption that adults apprehend or perceive their own existence as situated and limited in time, is ideally suited to exploring diverse self-constructions of identity in later life. While there is an objective reality that time to live does run out, how this fact is interpreted by transgender-identified people in later life and the influence this has on one's behavior and identity development serves as a theoretical bridge between gerontological and queer perspectives on time.

Queer theory has been used to address subjective temporal identities with respect to social structure, inequality, and the institutionalized life course as Halberstam's (2005) notion of "queer time" highlights the "the potentiality of a life *unscripted* by the convention of family, inheritance and child rearing" and claims that "queer subcultures produce *alternative* temporalities" (p. 2) [italics mine]. Often these temporalities have been conceptualized within the context of shortened life trajectories related to marginalized status within modern Western societies. For example, the threat of severe illness and premature death experienced by many gay men during the AIDS crisis radically influenced their lifestyle choices and expectations for engaging in social life. While many gay men were already coping with the effects of social marginalization, the added sense of diminishing future time in this community contributed to an acute existential awareness among its members that their lives and identities existed outside normative expectations of marriage, reproduction and longevity. Halberstam's recognition of the potential for queer lives to develop with respect to unique temporal and existential concerns addresses part of the subjectivity that Baars and Dittmann-Kohli argue is needed in gerontological perspectives on identity and aging. Yet, this perspective has yet to be fully mobilized to take into account the actual experiences of aging with respect to these identities (Brown, 2009). In light of the current gay marriage movement, some scholars argue that asserting queer identities in reaction to heteronormative expectations is taking the form of "homonormativity" (Duggan, 2003), which may not constitute a queer temporality at all. The question of what queer temporalities will mean in rapidly changing political and social contexts demands more attention to longevity and queer identities over time.

Given the lack of literature on gender transitions in later life, the conceptual foundation for integrating existential and queer perspectives on late life gender transitions in this study draws from LGB research on the topic of coming out in later life. Floyd and Bakeman

(2006) offer a relevant life course perspective based on their empirical work with gay, lesbian and bisexual elders who come out later in life and argue that the process of sexual orientation identity development is driven both by maturational factors *as well as* social changes. In studies of LGB grandparents, the ability to disclose sexual orientation to family members has been shown to be an important part of their identity development in later life (Orel & Fruhauf, 2013), along with acknowledgement of the years spent participating in heteronormative culture, as one of Orel's (2004) interviewees so succinctly summarizes: "I just did what you were supposed to do...get married, have kids, and own the house with the white picket fence." (p. 69). This clear connection to heteronormative life cycles is common in narratives about coming out about one's sexuality, and I argue in this article that it is also important for transgender people contemplating a transition in later life because heteronormativity also has a constraining effect on gender expression (Butler, 2007). Older transgender persons who come out later in life may offer additional nuance and a longer life span perspective on Halberstam's notion of queer time, which has not been fully explored from either gerontological or queer perspectives. I argue that an integration of an existential time perspective, in which identity development is grounded in the subjective meanings derived from an awareness of having limited time to live, and the notion of queer time, in which gender variant people develop within self-constructed temporalities outside the heteronormative life course, may be integrated in order to contribute to knowledge development in a range of domains concerned with aging, identity and human development.

Why explore gender transitions in later life?

The field of gerontology has yet to explore health and wellbeing with respect to gender transitions in later life. Most writing on transgender aging has focused on critical and under-examined issues of social welfare in the lives of older transgender persons such as health, legal, financial, spiritual, trauma/abuse and end of life issues (Butler, 2009; Cook-Daniels & munson, 2010; Kidd & Witten, 2008; Minter, 2001; Persson, 2009; Porter, Ronneberg & Witten, 2013; Williams & Freeman, 2007; Witten, 2010, Witten & Eyler, 2012). We also know that mid-life is a critical period for transgender adults as they anticipate challenges of aging (Knochel, 2011). Recently, scholars have analyzed narrative expressions of identity as a means of examining successful aging for LGBT older adults (Van Wagenen, Driskell, & Bradford, 2013) as well as narratives related to transgender embodiment and aging (Siverskog, 2012). These offer an intellectual segue within the domain of LGBT aging for exploring the significance of older transgender persons' subjective experiences of contemplating or pursuing a transition later in life.

It is well known in transgender-oriented communities that many male-to-female identified people, often the oldest of the Baby Boomers, have only begun to seriously contemplate gender transitions in their later years. Witten and Eyler (2012) draw attention to this reality and the potential to address normative versus non-normative life course considerations with respect to transgender older adults, but lament the "scant" research on this topic (p. 214). From a life course perspective, the ways in which older transgender persons consider transition in later stages of life may offer insights into the ways that older adults navigate social constraints and opportunities throughout the life course. By illuminating multiple intersections between what it is to be "queer" and "aging" the participants in this study help

us to acknowledge and learn from the diversity within transgender communities so that we may both develop culturally appropriate needs assessments and services, as well as expand our concepts and theories in aging.

Method

Data Collection

Sample and Recruitment—Strategic sampling (Mason, 2002) was used to recruit persons 50 years of age or older who have seriously contemplated or have pursued a gender transition. I intentionally recruited male-to-female identified persons for interviews because they often come out/and or transition later in life than female-to-male-identified persons (Cook-Daniels, 2006). My main methods of recruitment included email flyers sent to community leaders with whom I had developed relationships through activist work in Chicago, word of mouth, and snowball referrals. I was able to recruit 22 participants.

Conceptualizing the gender identities of participants is complex, multi-faceted, and may best be understood from diverse theoretical and practical standpoints; addressing this complexity is beyond the scope of this article, thus my analyses explore the thoughts and use the language of older male-to-female identified persons themselves. When I speak of gender identity I am referring to the degree to which people feel *congruent* in their body and mind and *authentic* in their lives. In addition, gender identity, the self-conception of one's gender, is also to be distinguished from biological sex. My discussion of the ways in which people contemplate and pursue transition is intentionally non-medical and non-legal. For some people, a transition may mean pursuing hormone therapy or surgical modifications of their bodies while for others this means re-negotiating their social and familial relationships. For others yet, it may mean the act of contemplation and discovering the power of making an informed decision about one's future. In this study, I use the word "transition" to talk about the process through which a person may decide to change from living "part time" (a term often used by participants to label expressing their preferred gender identity as female in private or only in some aspects of their lives) to "full time" (a term used to describe living in and expressing their preferred female gender 100% of the time). At the time of my interviews, fifteen of the participants were living full time, three were living part time but were still not sure about transitioning, three were living part time and had decided not to transition, and one person was living part time and considered herself in preparation for transition.

Additional demographic characteristics of the 22 participants varied across race, class, and age. Eighteen participants were European American, three were African American and one Asian American. Based on information shared during the interviews, approximately 20% expressed ongoing socio-economic challenges, 30% expressed a sense of socio-economic stability, though somewhat tenuous, and about 50% shared that their socio-economic position afforded stability and some luxury. Twelve participants were between 50-60 years old, seven were between 60-70 years old, two were between 70-80 years old, and one participant was 82 years old.

Interviews and Participant Observation—In-depth biographical interviews focused on participants' gender expression and identity over time, work and relationships, and thoughts about transitioning. They were conducted at participants' homes and, in a few cases, at public locations such as coffee shops or parks and lasted from 1.5 to 2.5 hours. Eighteen interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, four were recorded with handwritten notes. Participant observation (Burawoy et al., 1991; Emerson, 2001) was carried out with the permission of organizers at three national transgender conferences in the Southeast, Midwest and Northwest of the United States. The conferences selected are unique in that they are attended by many older male-to-female identified persons, and are highly influential in this community. Participant observation at these conferences allowed me to contextualize interview data, assess similar or dissimilar cases, and sensitize myself to a social context that impacts the ways in which older transgender people think about identity and transitions. I took field notes (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011) focused on issues of aging, late life transitions, and conference history during 170 hours in the field. This paper draws from data collected through both interviews and participant observation.

Data Analysis

The findings presented in this article are based on interpretive analyses conducted as part of a larger extended case method (ECM) study (Burawoy et al., 1991; Burawoy, 1998; Samuels, 2009; Small, 2009). I used NVivo 9 qualitative data analysis software (QSR, 2012) to organize the interview and field data and develop a set of open and focused codes (Padgett, 2008). These codes identified topics, concepts and examples of the significance and function of time and time awareness in people's contemplation of a transition. I used extensive memo writing (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011) as a method of articulating early themes in the data and as my foundation for abstraction and interrogation of the data. The process of analyzing the data was an iterative one that included the use of memos, the articulation and refinement of early conceptual findings with an external observer, and presenting the data and early analyses to colleagues in a qualitative methods working group at the University of Chicago.

Results

Time Left

A multitude of individual and societal factors intersect when a person comes out about their gender identity or contemplates a transition in later life, but one that stands out almost universally is an awareness of time left to live. An acute perception that there are limited days in which to embrace one's authentic self, experience the joy of feeling whole and congruent within oneself and to face death with a sense of having truly lived is central to the contemplation of transition for many people. Katherine¹, age 62, shared one of the most poignant examples of this during our interview at a neighborhood diner:

I don't know if you've heard these commercials on the radio about Michigan – Michigan.org.– I love the commercials...until – until they put the one on about, 'An average person has 25,000 days in their life. Some of those days should be spent in Michigan.' And I went, '25,000 days divided by 365 – whoa, that don't give me

much time left'...I've been obsessed with that 25,000 days ever since then...I'm not afraid of dying, but I got a lot of stuff to do.' And I says, 'I can't die yet, not in 25,000 days!'

Barbara, age 82, a vibrant European American woman twice divorced and now happily dating, reflected on her decision to transition in her early 70s:

I was thinking 'it's time to roll the dice and go' because I was just starting to get to 70 then 71, and I knew, I figured, 'I've got 20 years to go.' Why shouldn't I live those 20 years as Barbara and do it right?

Similarly, Adele, an African American woman who recovered from substance abuse difficulties in her 40s, expressed to me that "at 57, I'm moving into the backside of my life, I don't have a lot of time to screw around!" Alana, also in her 50s, who has never been married and is the primary caregiver for her parents, is just starting to plan her transition on the job as a marketing analyst. She linked a sense of time and identity in this way when she said, "It's like, man, I kind of lost decades here. I gotta get going! I expect to live past 100, but still, I lost time. I could be expressing my true gender here."

For many of the people I interviewed, the realization of having only so much time left to live served as a catalyst for contemplating transition or coming out to family and friends about their gender identity. However, this was not the only narrative about time or age that played a role in their decision about a transition. One respondent, Suzanna, who at 60 years old is now enjoying life post-transition, considered her age and time left to live as possible deterrents from pursuing a transition:

There were a number of times I said I was too old. 'I'm 50 some odd years old. I'm too old to make this change. I'm only going to be around another 30 years or so, why bother? Why rock the boat?' My friend Jessica, she was wonderful about this, [she said] 'Of course you're not too old. You're never too old. As long as you're sucking wind, you're not too old!' So, I mean there was a little bit of that, I had to overcome my own bias in order to say that I'm going to enjoy the rest of my life.

In Suzanna's case, she was also considering whether she wanted to undergo hormone therapy and whether surgical options would be possible for her physically. While these are concerns that people of all ages may have when contemplating a transition, the awareness of a finite time to live puts these considerations into a more overt temporal context.

For older transgender persons in this study, the knowledge of even the *possibility* of transitioning played an important role in their development. For example, many participants remembered hearing about Christine Jorgensen and the sensationalized news headlines about her sex change in the 1950s (Docter, 2008). As Katherine recalled:

I heard [the news reel on Christine Jorgensen] on the radio, you know, and I forget what year it was – late '50s maybe? I think it was late '50s. I kind of thought, 'That's not possible. That's got to be a mistake.' And then I would listen and listen purposely to see if I could hear the story again, and I thought, 'Oh, my God, *it must be possible*. They're saying it again and again and again.' Really I was just

fascinated by that. I thought, ‘Oh, my God, there is somebody else that’s like me.’
[italics mine]

For people who have struggled with gender identity over the course of many decades, an awareness of time left takes on an existential significance that is inextricably linked with the possibilities that emerge in social context. Thus, personal narratives about identity development also take into account the ways in which social expectations and social possibilities influence people’s view of themselves.

Time Served

In the context of identity development and aging, it is hard to separate looking forward from looking back. Many participants in this study who have contemplated a gender transition in their later years find themselves reflecting on their past and ways in which they have navigated the world with respect to their gender identity and expression. Through both field work and one-on-one interviews, I came across multiple ways in which people described past phases of their lives, saying they “did what they were supposed to do” or felt they “served time” conforming their gender to social expectations or demands. Having put in their time following society’s expectations, many felt a sense of urgency about how they might spend the last part of their lives. Katherine expanded on her reaction to the Michigan.org commercials by evoking a prison metaphor:

And then they came out with a second one of those [Michigan.org commercials] that said...‘the average person retires and they still have 3,000-some days of retirement.’ Wait a minute, that’s only – you know, and that made it even worse...and now – see, I was actually thinking about writing a book. I was gonna call it *40 to Life*, and it was gonna be about, you know, for all these years you kept the secret...and finally you’re able to be born – you know, after 40 years you were able to be born. Most people think, “40 to life, that’s a prison sentence” you know. That’s why I play on words in the title.

She goes on to reflect further from the vantage point of having come out to her family recently and being able to spend more time embracing her femininity, for which she was ridiculed as a young person:

But looking back then it’s kind of like from the aspect of, ‘Oh my God, all this time I could’ve been doing this, I could’ve been this, I might’ve even transitioned – you know, I might’ve made different choices,’ you know – Well, now when I look at that it’s kind of like, ‘Oh, my, God, I want to do this forever...Now I’ve only got probably, oh, 20-some years left maybe at that? That kind of drags me down when I think of it that way...you know, I think back all these times where people make fun of you and, you know, all that time wasted – all that time wasted.

The notion of time wasted, or time served, was also framed with respect to feeling unsuccessful and unsatisfied with one’s life. Deborah, a European American woman who runs her own business at age 55, and who recently completed her transition to living full time, reflects:

In 2002, that started to get really hard for me. And so, I was getting close to my 50th birthday. I was like – I was what, you know, 45 at that point. Yeah, it was, like 45 or 46 – and I just felt that I'd been a failure my whole life. I had my whole life – the better part of my life behind me, you know?

For several people, looking back allowed them to appreciate some aspects of their life while balancing these with the frustration of having less time to embrace their authentic gender identity. Carly, who recently retired in her early 60s, expressed no regrets about being a parent, but also recognizes that this role, which she fulfilled as a father, took away from another part of her identity:

Yes. My daughter is – she'll be turning 40. My son is 37, now. So...looking at my children, oh, my God, I let them know a million times, I would not change a thing, cause I need them, that it's not like I was sad that I had them...but then that feeling [of gender conflict] stayed with me, and it progressed as you're going through your lifespan, and you're going through Erickson's different stages, I'm getting to a point in my life where I'm running out of years. I could see the light at the end of the tunnel. When you're 20 or 30, and I once smoked. I was careless about my lifestyle. You go, 'Oh, I got time to recoup. I got time to regenerate my – my body cells, and all this kind of stuff.' And – but then, at a certain point, you start getting a grasp that 50 isn't far away, 60 isn't far away. And then you take a look at lifespan statistics, heart attacks, and – so you're getting closer to that, and your whole frame of reference to life starts morphing or changing. And so – so I started becoming a little bit more anxious about, 'how am I gonna live? – or am I gonna die, actually pass on to the next life without experiencing being who I am?' And it gnawed at me for a long time.

One of the ways in which transgender communities have fostered this kind of reflection in social spaces, especially for those who have spent years struggling with feelings similar to those expressed by Katherine, Deborah and Carly, has been to create special ceremonies at conferences that encourage reflection on one's growth and outlook for the future. At the start of many national conferences, "first timers" are often given special welcomes, and are sometimes connected with a "big sister" to help guide them through what can be an overwhelming social experience. At one such conference, I observed a private graduation ceremony in which big sisters awarded first time attendees with a pin to signify their growth over the course of the conference. An excerpt from my field notes demonstrates the social aspect of bringing past, present and future together in one moment:

Nearing end of ceremony, 70 year old first time attendee, Summer, received butterfly pin from 'big sister' and faced the group with tears in her eyes and said 'now I can live the rest of my life the way I want to'---I am noticing that most people have tears in their eyes at this point, myself included.

The emotionally charged dynamics that flourish in ceremonies such as this one draw attention to the role that transgender communities play in fostering queer alternatives for identity development in later life. Further, these analyses suggest that an awareness of time and the meaning given to its finitude can be a catalyst for looking back, looking forward, and pushing gender identity development into the foreground of one's later life. As Casey,

age 66, so poetically summarized: “30 years alone, 30 years for other people, now 30 years for me!”

Discussion

Hughes argues that queer aging is not just about “adding in” LGBT-identified people as another identity group in the gerontological sphere (2004), just as Duggan (2003) argues that queer challenges to heteronormativity should not simply be the construction of a “homonormativity”. The findings in this study suggest that the biographical narratives of older transgender persons do not simply offer additional examples of how people make decisions when perceiving a shrinking time horizon in later life. Rather, I argue that people who contemplate a gender transition in later life, especially with respect to existential time perspectives, are doing so by re-negotiating the social expectations they perceive as having dominated their lives previously and thus are expanding notions of queer temporality by drawing attention to growing older in ways that do not follow heteronormative scripts. Participants in this study are conscious of social expectations for older age, most notably that they are expected to transition into their retirement years as male. Often, participants do not reject such expectations altogether, rather they modify them to fit their developing sense of self. For example, it was common for several people I interviewed to carefully plan their final working years so that they could retire in male-mode, while also preparing for their transition to living full time as their female selves after retirement. This careful negotiation demonstrates how older transgender persons integrate an awareness of “time left” with the realities of “time served” and create a uniquely queer path through a common life phase such as retirement. Becoming aware of one’s time left to live is not new to aging or human development scholarship (Carstensen, Isaacowitz & Charles, 1999), nor to the field of gerontological social work. In fact, this existential dynamic is probably present in most work in this domain. However, this study shows that constraints on people’s gender identities in earlier life heightens the significance and immediacy of these time horizons and the opportunity to experience an authentic gender identity before one dies. The narrative perspective on identity and aging emphasized by Baars (2012) and offered by participants in this study may offer a conceptual bridge between an existential and queer perspective on time and open new avenues of thought in queer aging. The notion that one’s existence is meaningful with respect to its time limitation necessitates that we recognize the ways in which older people *modify* the nature of their existence (in this case, through gender transition) by constructing temporalities in later life that challenge heteronormative expectations (that they grow older as male).

The biographies, observations, and interpretations presented in this article demonstrate how transgender older adults acutely perceive their lives in terms of time past and time left. The ways participants in this study compared past, present and potential future phases of life, however, show that awareness of time is also an essential component of people’s sense of narrative identity. While this may be a truism in all of human development, what is unique about people’s contemplation of transition later in life is that they have achieved this narrative sense of self within a heteronormative context that has severely constrained their gender identities. While Halberstam emphasized the analogy of a life script when discussing the ways in which queer people and culture have created space and time that is unscripted by

normative social structures (2005), I propose that the people in this study may offer more complex life course narratives that integrate experiences of having indeed followed a normative script, while also modifying this script in order to nurture identity development in later life. I further suggest that these narratives point our attention to the ways in which identity development is multi-faceted and does not take place in stable and predictable ways. Halberstam argues that queer time is often marked by “rapid bursts” of development that do not fit neatly into normative temporal frames; the life choices made by participants in this study promote such development in later life and demonstrate how this theory is relevant in an aging context.

Gerontological social workers are poised as potential leaders in expanding research and designing interventions for working with LGBT elders. This includes leading the larger project of expanding cultural meanings of aging and expanded opportunities for identity development across the life course. In recent years, the visibility of LGBT persons has increased tremendously in the field of social work. Similarly, gerontological social work has begun to emphasize the importance of understanding aging issues with respect to LGBT persons, as clearly evidenced by this journal's special issue. However, this visibility has not yet generated the theoretical depth and breadth found in other gerontological domains. For example, Fullmer (2006) emphasizes the importance of using an historical perspective and taking context into account when addressing LGBT aging, but this work could be expanded on by adding more conceptual material on transgender issues. In this regard, Burdge (2007) makes a strong theoretical argument for social workers to participate in the deconstruction of the heteronormative gender binary that often oppresses transgender clients, but this argument could also be strengthened by considering the ways in which aging and growing older complicate this task.

Similarly, Davis (2008), in her thoughtful presentation of transgender issues aimed at beginning competency for social workers, does not address issues of later life, even in her section titled “Age.” Social service resources, especially those developed most recently by the National Resource Center on LGBT Aging (2013) have demonstrated tremendous leadership by highlighting transgender elders as having distinct needs across the life course, but these efforts could be buoyed by the development of conceptual orientations for research and work with older transgender clients. I would like to expand upon these efforts by suggesting that as social workers, we challenge ourselves to be cognizant of making theoretical strides along with direct service advancements in our consideration of transgender aging issues. One way to approach this is to make sure that as we gather clinical and research data, we are not only paying attention to past and present, but also exploring future opportunities for growth. Such growth fostering opportunities are often overlooked in our work and research with older adults. As human beings continue to live longer lives, our understanding of the potential for development in later life will be increasingly important for expanding our knowledge base in the field of gerontological social work. From a professional perspective, we must also create meaningful collaborations with scholars and leaders in queer studies and gender-progressive movements. For example, issues of gender identity and sexual orientation in children and families have recently gained increasing attention and gerontological social work has the potential to contribute insights from perspectives near the end of life that have been missing in this domain thus far. By

recognizing the possibilities for identity development in later life from multiple perspectives, we may also discover new possibilities for our profession to more effectively and holistically support the growth and wellbeing of those with whom we work.

Acknowledgments

This project was supported through pre-doctoral student funding through the Center on Aging at the University of Chicago, National Institute on Aging T32 Training Grant. Thank you to Linda Waite and the Center for the Economics and Demography of Aging at the University of Chicago for their support. Thank you also to the participants in this project who generously shared their experiences with me.

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