

Mount Saint Vincent University
Department of Applied Human Nutrition

**More than a Meal:
Senior Women Connecting Through Food
in a Community Space**

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Abstract

Background: The growing demographic of adults aged 65 years and older has initiated community action to support seniors (Nova Scotia Department of Seniors, 2017). Biological, psychological, and social age-related changes can impact seniors lives in unique and multidimensional ways, often shifting social engagement and routines around food (Robinson 2018, Porter Starr, McDonald & Bales, 2015; Morley, 2016). For women who are traditionally the primary food provisioners, connection to food can construct sense of identity and interpersonal relationships, (Lupton, 1996) which may be impacted as food activities become less frequent with age.

Purpose: This thesis was conducted to understand and describe what it means to senior women to have a place in the community where they can gather for a meal. The main objectives were to, 1) understand participants experience having lunch and fellow Empowered Women Blossom members at Hope Blooms 2) describe what being a senior woman in the community means to the participants and 3) explore participants engagement with food and how this may have changed over time.

Methods: Participates were five members of Empowered Women Blossom (EWB). EWB is a senior's women group within Hope Blooms (HB), a youth organization in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Face to face, semi-structured individual interviews took place with the participants.

Analysis: To derive meaning from the women's experiences, phenomenological methodology was used. Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Theory was incorporated as a framework to delineate and make sense of the interconnected influences within women's immediate and extended social and political environments.

Results: Sense of belonging, the importance of community, and engagement with food were the three themes that emerged. Being part of EWB at HB created a sense of belonging for the women through connections formed with the staff, youth, and fellow EWB members. Participants felt respected by the youth as seniors at HB and empowered to contribute within their communities. Gathering for lunch weekly at HB and engaging in nutrition education highlighted the benefit of nutrition education and social eating, while also showing the complex challenges of food choice and preparation. Participants valued learning about nutrition and eating meals with the group and expressed the responsibility to take care of themselves with age. Lay and professional nutrition and health recommendations were additional factors in how women perceived or talked about their eating behaviours, at times causing uncertainty and confusion of what to prepare. The meals eaten with EWB were described as healthy or healthier than when they ate alone, with women often describing their habits as bad, unhealthy or lacking discipline. Disinterest and motivation in cooking was also a barrier to prepare meals as a result of living alone or having no one to prepare for or eat with.

Conclusion and recommendations: The benefits of social eating are clear and well-understood, however, is challenging to achieve for senior women who live alone. Creating spaces for aging adults within community spaces, such as youth organizations, can foster social inclusion through social eating and strengthen communities. By centering the social and cultural significance of food, dietitians can empower aging adults and help navigate ongoing changes of age that shift eating habits.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Personal Context

Many of us can envision a mother, grandmother or important woman in our lives in the kitchen preparing a meal for others. These moments often bring people together, creating relationships and connections through the sharing of food.

The motivation behind this research project was partially due to my interest in women's relationship to food and how it changes throughout the life-course. However, this research study is rooted into my personal life as it was largely inspired by time spent with women who have shared their knowledge and helped shape my understanding of how women engage with food. Spending time with Empowered Women Blossom, as well as my grandmothers and mother fostered a connection to this topic that was not anticipated when beginning my masters. The relationships I developed with my participants was an asset throughout the research process. Conversely, the inevitable bias I had beginning this process required continual reflection to acknowledge that my experience was largely shaped by subjective factors that do not reflect the reality of many women's experiences. Checking my assumptions, values, and feelings, while striving to deconstruct ways of thinking and knowing was a challenging but critical component to understanding the stories I had the privilege of hearing and sharing.

1.2. Introduction to research

Adults aged 65 and above are a growing population anticipated to reach almost 23% of Canadas population by 2031.¹ Over the past decade, Nova Scotia has had an older population compared to other provinces with 20.8% of the population consisting of seniors.¹ As women statistically have

a longer lifespan than men, almost 70% of the aging population aged 85 and older identify as female.¹ The demographic shift has encouraged communities to bring attention to how programs, initiatives and policies will support and meet the diverse needs of those in their senior years.²

Biological, psychological and social changes that occur throughout the experience of aging can shift the daily interactions, interpersonal relationships and routines which largely construct individual's identity.³⁻⁵ For some women who are now of senior age, the responsibility to feed others was primarily a feminized role, strongly tied to their identity as a female.⁶⁻⁸ Perspectives of the history of women's relationship to food illuminates how the time and labour intensive responsibility of food provision can foster connection between people, preserve cultural and familial traditions, and serve as medium for self-expression.^{4,6,9,10} The relationship between women and food, and how food-related tasks are performed is unique and personal, shaped by many subjective, social factors such as culture, income, ethnicity, and geographic location.¹¹

As women begin to experience age-related changes, and changes to their household dynamic, their engagement with food may begin to shift as well. Decreased energy intake as a result of physiological changes such as dentition issues, medication side-effects, loss of appetite, thirst, taste and smell impairment, mobility issues and quicker or longer satiation, are well-documented to impact eating patterns.¹² Furthermore, no longer having an individual to cook for can disrupt food activities, social engagement and food intake.^{10,12,13} As identity may be challenged, preserved or shaped through food and eating practices,^{4,9,10} considering the consequences of these age-related changes beyond food intake is critical. In some areas, such as the United

Kingdom, the impact living alone has on diet has been understood to have a stronger correlation than chronological age or resource sufficiency.¹⁴

Examining how societal ideals of age play into the experiencing of aging, particularly senior women's perceptions of themselves and level of engagement within their communities is an important aspect of how individuals experience their senior years. Systemic ideologies have, over time, led to stereotyping elderly individuals as unproductive and inconsequential in society.¹⁵ The process of aging is often thought of as a process of continual loss of social participation and health, and negative ideas of age that have become common beliefs in Western society can exacerbate social isolation of seniors.^{2,16} Social isolation is commonly experienced for older adults and is understood to be considerably detrimental to overall health.² For instance, within the context of nutritional health, changing diet patterns leading to diminished energy and nutrient intake may be symptoms of social isolation.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ There is also increasing knowledge of the gendered differences within aging, where women, in comparison to their male counterparts are at higher risk of poor living conditions and health such as social isolation, malnutrition and food insecurity.^{17,20,21} Vulnerability is also increased as inequitable power within social and political structures creates opportunities, barriers or marginalization based on the intersection of class, race, and culture.^{22,23} The importance of understanding the various identities women hold, and how they intersect with age underlines the need for greater visual representation of senior-aged women and their perception and experience of aging to deconstruct stereotypes which represent aging women as a homogenous group of fragile and vulnerable individuals.^{24,25}

In response to the shifting age demographics, age-friendly community initiatives have developed with the intention to foster social inclusion and build more cohesive communities.¹⁸ Sharing meals with others also been highlighted as a valuable practice to promote social interaction and improve nutritional health.²⁶ Canadas new food guide released in 2019 highlights the value of social eating to achieve a healthy diet with their recommendation to “Eat meals with others”.²⁶ Included within this recommendation is a section catered to the senior population stating that “Seniors often tend to eat alone. This can result in a sense of isolation and feelings of loneliness, especially at mealtimes.”²⁶ Communal eating has been understood to foster feelings of trust, happiness, and provide a sense of support for those engage in regularly eating with others.²⁷ Understanding the benefit of eating socially, and the significance it may hold for the aging population presents both the question and opportunity of how food can be used as a way to build and maintain connections between people, providing nourishment beyond nutrient content. The focus of this research was based on the considerations of women’s socialized and inherent connection to food, the role of food in constructing identity through interpersonal interactions, and the impact of aging on one’s food practices.

1.3. Research focus

A phenomenological approach was used to understand what it means to senior women to have a space in the community where they can gather and share a meal. The research was conducted with five community dwelling senior women who attend a weekly senior women’s group “*Empowered Women Blossom*” (*EWB*) at Hope Blooms, a non-profit youth organization in North End Halifax. Using a phenomenological approach meant understanding and describing their individual experiences within the context of the group.

1.4. Research purpose

The purpose of the research was to understand and describe the meanings attributed to having a common space to gather for a meal to community-dwelling senior aged women.

1.5. Research objectives

The research focused on the following objectives:

- Understand participants experience having lunch with fellow EWB members at Hope Blooms
- Describe what being a senior woman in the community means to the participants
- Explore participants engagement with food and how this may have changed over time

1.6. Significance of the research

Malnutrition and nutritional adequacy are often highlighted as key concerns for nutritional health of the elderly; however, the social and cultural aspect of eating is also at the root of nutrition.^{12,14,26,27} Centering the social and cultural symbolism of food within the discourse of nutritional health and dietary intake of the aging population was an important focus. Secondly, a hopeful outcome was to illuminate the benefit of social eating and preservation of food practices to support the aging process within the lives of aging women. While social eating is beneficial for overall health and happiness, the barriers and challenges to do so should be acknowledged and understood. Furthermore, reductionist approaches nutrition which often medicalize food can lead to conflicting and confusing information, causing uncertainty of what to eat. This uncertainty may be compounded while trying to navigate age-related changes.

The majority of the senior population is comprised of female as women often outlive their male counterparts comprising. However, there is need for greater representation of women's experience of aging. This research seeks to illuminate and empower women's voices to diversify the narrative of their experiences and identities, including their engagement with food. While there was attention paid to women's connection to food, and potential loss over time, this research is also significant in that it outlines how not all senior women have spent much of their lives cooking and identify with the role of the food provisioner.

Finally, this research was intended to contribute to the conversation and collective action around building more inclusive, age-friendly communities, to ultimately enhance the well-being of seniors and communities as a whole. The population of adults aged sixty and above is increasing provincially, nationally and globally. Each generation faces different challenges and experiences; thus, each senior population will be unique and continuously evolve with different offerings, needs and challenges. Listening to the stories of seniors and questioning how they are supported and whether their needs are met is an ever-evolving responsibility for all individuals and communities, within both the private and public sector.

2. Review of Relevant Literature

2.1. Introduction

The experience of aging brings many changes that can shift the daily interactions and practices that were once routine. Changes to household structure, income, appetite, mobility, and health are a just a few factors that interconnect to impact individuals in unique ways. Humans interpersonal relationships and daily interactions play a large part in constructing identities.³⁻⁵

Identity can be thought of as the person we think we are,³ and specific characteristics such as the role played within the family unit are believed to shape one's identity and sense of self.⁴

Traditionally, women often were the primary food provisioners, with identity and sense of self rooted in the interpersonal and social connections formed through sharing and providing food to others, and the extensive tasks required to do so.³⁻⁵ The wide-ranging changes inherent to the process of aging can be contextualized to women's interaction and relationship to food and how it is impacted throughout the life course. Additionally, not all senior women today occupy or occupied the traditional feminized role of the food provisioner. Relationships to food, and interactions around food and food activities inform an experience unique to each woman.

The increasing population of seniors residing in Nova Scotia, with steady increase nationally and globally encouraged initiatives and advocacy to support seniors.² Discrepancy in lifespan across genders, with women statistically outliving their male-identifying counterparts, has warranted analysis of how senior women face different circumstances around quality of life.^{20,28} With the increase of life expectancy comes the importance of understanding aging women's health and their needs.²⁸ Relevant literature examining aging women's quality of life has discovered that senior women can experience greater social isolation, risk of malnutrition as well as food security.^{17,20,21,29} The purpose of this research is to understand what it means to a group of senior aged women to have a common space to gather and share a meal. Effectively describing and understanding this phenomenon through the eyes of the participants required exploration of relevant literature to understand women's relationships to food. Furthermore, the process of aging and how it intersects with women's connection to food was also explored. Finally, to provide background to this project and contextualize the value of holding space in communities

for aging women, special attention was paid to social engagement within the women's community of Hope Blooms and North End Halifax.

2.2. Women and food

For many women, especially the women of today's senior population, being the primary caregiver is a familiar role⁶⁻⁸ A major responsibility within caregiving is to cook for and feed one's family.⁶⁻⁸ Scholars who have sought to understand the significance or symbolism of food in individuals' lives have come to find that the activities and tasks around food are embedded in individuals' familial, cultural, ethnic and gender identity. Anthropologist Claude Fischler's *Food, self and identity* (1988) declared the centrality of food in humans' sense of identity. Fischler identified the disconnect between hard sciences that prioritize nutrient adequacy and metabolic function of food, and social sciences that honour the social and symbolic dimensions of food. The two views illustrate a complex and often fragmented idea of humans' relationships to food and eating and how it is built into identity.³ For some women, identity can be informed by a sense of empowerment, resourcefulness, strength and stability that is cultivated through food provision.^{4,30}

The ways in which identity may be challenged, preserved, or shaped through food and eating practices has been explored by researchers.^{4,9,31} The relationship between women's identity and food was illuminated in Plastow et al.'s., 2014 systematic review and meta-analysis exploring the relationship between food activities and identity maintenance later in life.⁴ Food activities, which were defined as any task, action or life experience involving food proved to be meaningful ways to maintain autonomy and sense of personal identity.⁴ Women who continued to cook traditional

meals and share family recipes with others felt they maintained their ethnic and self-identities as cooks. Further value was attributed to their ability to show love and nurture others by continuing to create and share family recipes during changes in life such as birth, marriage, or illness.

Similarly, O'Sullivan et al., 2008 explored Canadian women's food-related activities around Christmas, which supported the notion that women maintain and shape their cultural and familial traditions through cooking during times of celebration. It is of equal importance to consider the impact on women's sense of identity when they are challenged to perform food practices.

Hindered ability to prepare meals due to falling ill can lead to feeling a sense of lost control and threatened identity.^{4,10,21}

Conversely, feminist scholarship has critiqued women's intuitive connection to food as an outcome of the socially constructed and feminized role of the caregiver.⁶⁻⁸ The constructions of a woman's identity and how their gender is performed is often considered to be an innate, or inherent trait that is in fact largely shaped by the learned tasks undertaken to feed others.^{4,6} The socio-cultural domain of food as outlined by feminist scholars Patricia Allen and Caroline Sachs is centered in women's responsibilities for feeding others; a responsibility that is often passed from other women in their lives such as mothers, aunts, or grandmothers.^{6,32} Women's intimacy with food can be deepened by the pressure they place on themselves to care for and feed in a way that they are socialized to believe will create the ideal family.^{6,10,30} The tasks required to provide family meals such as shopping, preparing, cooking and cleaning have stimulated discussion as to whether these responsibilities are a source of empowerment for women or continue to "reinscribe women's subordination in the home".^{6(p.3)} The performance of and feelings toward these often labour intensive and repetitive activities are also informed by class or socioeconomic status.¹¹

Time and financial constraints paired with food responsibilities may bring forth feelings of inadequacy for working-class women striving provide middle-class standards.¹¹

To understand women's connection to food and how it is uniquely shaped, it is important to acknowledge that not all women have had the same commitment or subordination to food preparation as mentioned by Allen & Sachs, nor did they necessarily occupy the role as the food provisioner. Delormier, Frohlich & Potvin denote families as their own social system, where practices reinforce the family institution. The social practices which are performed and establish family routines are influenced by relationships both in and out of the household.³² It is worth noting that the dominant conversations around women's responsibilities and connection to food lacks attention toward women who are single or without children. Assuming lone women are not living in isolation, the formation of a family unit atypical of the heteronormative standard may influence one's food provisioning roles in similar and differing ways. Interpersonal relationships around food may be shaped differently, or similarly for individuals who do not or have not lived within a nuclear family. The Organizational Framework for Exploring Nutrition Narratives (OFFENN) by Morley³¹ acknowledges the diverse influences on feeding and eating, created to understand issues around feeding and eating for those with "an infinite array of circumstances."^{31(p.41)}

In addition to gender, other personal and social factors such as culture, race, and socioeconomic status intersect in a multitude of ways to influence how food practices are formed and executed, shaping the relationships, feelings and meanings women associate with food.^{7,32} Social inequity within food systems, as well as the rhetoric around healthy eating significantly informs food

practices beyond what is often believed to be a personal choice.³³ Many visible minority, immigrants, senior-aged, and single women face economic challenges impacting opportunity for a stable standard of living, a direct barrier to food access.^{1,20,34} With consideration of the cultural significance of food, healthy eating discourse may exclude and overlook culturally relevant food choices. Moreover, barriers such as cost and availability to access culturally appropriate food to cook a traditional meal for family can also create difficult and emotional experiences around food provision.³⁴

Within the context of age, changes to a woman's relationship with food may be a combination of intersecting factors that influence overall health, well-being, and even perceived health or self-worth. Depression, anxiety or other psychological effects as an outcome of loss, change or adversity can have direct impact on food activities through decreased desire to eat and diminished appetite.^{10,13} Furthermore, physical changes to one's body and the desire to remain youthful can lead to stress around food in fear of weight gain.²⁴

The way in which food is embodied for women may ebb and flow with opportunities and challenges throughout the life course. For older women who have lost the desire or ability to prepare and enjoy food due to changes in household structure and economic stability, cooking and eating which may have brought joy or purpose, can seem unappealing and burdensome.^{10,29,35} If the individual(s) with whom a woman used to share meals have passed or moved on, there is an absence that is greater than the empty seat at the table, or the lost aroma that once filled the home. Changes to food activities within a woman's life may have considerable effects beyond the common concern of inadequate nutrient intake for aging

women³⁶. The impact of feeling challenged to meet the pressures or desires to continue one's relationship to food and engage in normalized eating behaviours such as preparing and sitting down for three meals a day can affect self-worth and sense of identity as an individual, as a woman, and as a member of a family or community.⁷ As one transitions out of the role as the food provisioner and experiences decreased frequency of social activities centered around food as a result, how can support systems be put in place to maintain these activities throughout aging?^{4,29,36}

2.3. The experience of aging

The population of adults aged 65 and above has increased and will continue to rise. On July 1st of 2019, 17.5% of Canada's population were seniors, a number anticipated to increase to 22% by 2031. Nova Scotia has had an older population compared to other provinces over the past decade with 20.8% of the population consisting of seniors.³⁷ As women statistically outlive men, almost 70% of the senior population aged 85 and above are women. The number of centenarians in Canada has tripled since 2001, with over 10,000 adults living over 100 years, 82% of whom are women.³⁷ This demographic shift is bringing attention to how communities will support and meet the diverse needs of those in their senior years.²

Aging is a unique process for each individual. Gerontologists have outlined four dimensions of aging- chronological, biological, psychological, and social.³⁸ Biological aging refers to changes to the body that are often inevitable as people get older. For example, hearing loss, sense of taste, and compromised mobility are all common age-related changes. Changes to mental function and personality, such as memory loss and depression are part of what is considered psychological

aging.³⁸ Social ageing on the other hand, is concerned with changes within the roles and relationships of an individual's personal life as well as their formal networks such as work and community organizations.³⁸ The dimensions of aging are clearly not isolated from one another. Biological and psychological age-related changes would influence how an individual may continue to socially engage in their community as well as how they may be perceived or treated within their communities. There is growing understanding of the psychological and sociological impacts on aging.^{2,18} Aging successfully is challenging to define, however has demonstrated positive correlation with people's social relationships, perceived health, self-efficacy, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, and coping skills.³⁹ Looking to the Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) is effective in broadening the responsibility of successful aging beyond the individual level to understand it as a collective responsibility based on 14 social and economic factors which determine individual and population health.⁴⁰ Some of the relevant determinants include gender, income, food insecurity, race, disability and stress, bodies and illness.⁴⁰

A major contributor to successful aging occurs at a macro-level where societal norms and values are situated.^{20,40,41} Society's perspective of age as a process of continual loss of social participation and health has led to a negative idea of aging, with systemic ideologies creating stereotypes of elderly individuals as unproductive and inconsequential in society.^{15,16,42} The process of aging is not entirely negative; for some, growing old provides time and space for personal exploration and the pursuit of interests that were neglected in earlier years.^{2,43} Silva & Boemer explored the experience of aging; some participants expressed gratitude for their health, and articulated aging to be a phase in which they were experiencing what it means to live.⁴³ Participants felt concerned as to how they were characterized by others and articulated the

importance of being recognized as citizens who were maintaining their identities.⁴³ The researchers summarized the experience of aging as not being its own process but rather the “continuity of life; the elderly remains the same person (s)he has always been.”^{43(p. 385)} Silva & Boemer’s description resonates with feminist gerontology perspectives of aging as another phase of one’s life course that results from earlier life influences.⁴⁴ Understanding the experience of aging for individuals has revealed that it is often described based on functional status and participation rather than chronological age.^{15,16,45} Aging individuals’ identity can be tied to their sense of dignity; thus, their identity becomes altered when inability to care for themselves occurs due to illness or old age.¹⁵

Positive aging is another philosophy around age, which was developed from positive psychology as a way to characterize age based on strength and resilience, opposed to deficit and decline.²³ It is also critical to consider how community participation and perception of age differs amongst cultures. Murray Nettles uses the idea of positive aging to explore the differences of aging for Black, and Indigenous women and women of colour in the United States, underlining the variance in how these senior women engaged and participated in their communities.²³ A study which Nettles referenced analyzed life stories of elderly African American men and women within the context of their homes articulated that “identities are not of aging per se, they are of the lived experiences, good and bad, that one has had in a place that is of significance to them”.^{46(pp.16-17)} Such memories and meanings attached to being in places gives individuals a sense of belonging, comfort, and positive self-image.²³ Nettles analysis of age illuminates the significance of places, such as in individual’s community, as well as the important roles women play in maintaining community spaces.⁴⁶

The process of aging can be further examined as a gendered experience as it manifests and is represented differently for men and women as well as individuals outside the gender binary.^{15,25,47} Beauty is often socially engrained within the female identity; thus, women's bodies tend to be a focus of aging which leads to the "invisibility" of women as they age.^{24(p.24)} Women are targeted with messages concerned with youthful aging and are encouraged to resist the physical effects of growing old.^{48,49} Consequently, women may feel the need to hide or feel bad about their aging bodies as if it is a shameful experience.²⁴ There is increasing understanding of the living conditions and health of aging women in comparison to their male counterparts, such as the risk of social isolation, malnutrition and food insecurity.^{17,20,21,29} In 2012, Queniart and Charpentier's qualitative analysis of older women and their representations of old age revealed a gap in knowledge of how women view their age and contributions to their world.²⁵ Ranging from ages 65 to 98, the majority of participants did not perceive themselves as old when it was described within the context of becoming dependent and fragile. Queniart and Charpentier's findings reiterated aging as a "dynamic experience that brings into play a range of socio-historical, cultural, symbolic and identity-based factors".^{25(p.1003)} The need for visible representation of the experiences of aging women and the deconstruction of stereotypes which represent them as fragile and vulnerable has been highlighted.^{24,25} As a response, critical gerontologists have used feminist frameworks to understand aging, acknowledging that the experience is partly shaped by the power dynamics that exist within gender.⁴⁴ To collectively deconstruct the negative views of older women requires the voices of aging women as contributors "to the socio-political world, not merely as casualties of the system."^{44(p.9)}

The subjective and gendered experience of aging is also demonstrated in how individuals adapt to and cope with age-related challenges and changes.^{47,50} Resilience has been an emerging area of study to understand how individuals adapt to and cope with adversity.⁵⁰ Examining the characteristic of resilience for aging women when faced with challenges or age-related changes was conducted by Gulbrandsen and Walsh in 2015.⁴⁷ The researchers addressed the range in understanding and beliefs in how qualitative researchers define resilience. Numerous concepts of resilience exist, in part because it is defined or practiced differently based on subjective factors that shape a woman identity such as age, ethnicity, health, income and geographic location.⁴⁷ Gulbrandsen and Walsh's use of intersectionality and critical feminism as frameworks supports the need for greater visible representation of the complex experience of aging for women given the variety of identities they may hold.⁴⁷ Many women, especially the generation that is now in their senior years, have demonstrated capacity to build resilience and persevere through the hardships of life.⁵⁰ For some, developing resilience may be an outcome of the norms that society places on women as caregivers. Additionally, as older women tend to live with lesser economic, health, and social conditions, resilience is developed and utilized to cope.^{20,50} For women born between 1925 and 1945, in what is known as the silent generation, living through challenging times such as economic depression cultivated significant self-sufficiency.²⁰ The mentality of "doing what you have to do" to make it work may be a lens through which aging women view their circumstances.⁵⁰ The characteristic or practice of resilience can also expand beyond an individual level. Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Phillips & Williamson, define resilience as "a dynamic process of social and psychological adaptation and transformation that can be characteristic of individuals, families, communities or larger social groups and is manifested as positive outcomes in the face of historical and current stresses."^{51(p. 85)}

2.4. Social connection

Social isolation, defined as the personal isolation of individuals from one another, is a common experience for aging adults.²¹ The challenges of engaging socially or participating in the community in the ways one once did arise for multiple reasons ranging from individual changes to health, to changes within the household. There is substantial evidence that social isolation is severely detrimental to overall health and longevity.^{2,18,21,40} Concern from government organizations, community services, and gerontologists as to how our communities will continue to socially include seniors throughout the process of aging has been a growing focus.²

As previously discussed, the process of aging involves multiple dimensions, many of which can increase risk of, or lead to social isolation.^{38,40} For example, social outings may become less accessible and enjoyable as a result of biological changes such as compromised physical mobility or hearing loss. Interest in or safety of leaving the household due to psychological changes may also hinder one's desire to engage in their community.² Although the dimensions of aging are categorized, they interconnect to collectively influence one's health and well-being. Diminished nutritional health and changing diet patterns may be symptoms of social isolation.¹² For instance, stress as an outcome of loneliness and isolation can precede depression which is known to disrupt appetite and eating patterns.^{12,13,17}

While social isolation can compromise health, social capital which Locher et al, defines as the norms, values and trust within a community or network of people, contributes to positive health outcomes.²¹ In western cultures, living in multigenerational households is not a common value,

nor is it feasible for many families due to decreasing family sizes and an influx of women in the workforce.⁵² Changes within the household have affected the amount of support available to aging adults.⁵² For older adults who are able to live out their final years within their homes, also known as aging in place, care and support is often received informally from friends and family in the community.^{52,53} Consequently, those who do not have support and live alone in their community are more likely to experience social isolation.^{15,53} Barriers to social inclusion are also present for those who do not live alone but have taken on the caregiver role for their spouse. Loneliness has been identified as a challenge that adults often face when taking care of the varying needs and well-being of their aging partner.⁵⁴

The positive impact of social support and interaction on the diets of aging adults have been explored in a number of research studies.^{12,14,55} In addition to many inevitable age-related physiological changes which influence nutritional health, living alone has a strong and well-understood correlation with poor diet. Bloom et al., looked at the influences of diet quality for older adults in the United Kingdom, highlighting that social engagement and social support mediate factors that play a part in changing food habits such as retirement and bereavement.¹⁴ Increased frequency of social contact is understood to foster healthier dietary habits as well as enhance resilience.¹⁴

The prevalence of loneliness and social isolation with age has warranted an intersectional approach. Critical gerontologists center the intersection of political and socioeconomic factors in how the experience of age is shaped.⁴⁷ Gender and race are two major examples of how social factors impact health for aging adults. Locher et al's assessment of ethnic and gender differences

of social support revealed that women face greater nutritional risk due to lack of social inclusion in comparison to their male counterparts, with Black females at the highest risk of poor nutritional health.²¹ The omnipresence of social issues such as racism, sexism, and classism and the ways in which they operate to create inequitable opportunities and access to health care, resources, and social participation are extensive.⁴⁰ Inequitable income distribution, discrimination and bias within the health care system, and unsafe environments which shaped individuals experience of the world has had residual impact on the way in which they now live their lives as seniors.⁵⁶ The gender pay gap and lack of women in the workforce that seniors once participated in affects senior women's income supplement.²⁰ Lone living senior women in Nova Scotia are one of the largest demographics of individuals whom live on Canada's unofficial poverty line and experience food insecurity.¹ In 2012, 3,097 women over age 65 living in Nova Scotia were experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity.^{1,57} Green-Lapierre et al., suggests this may not be an accurate representation of numbers as seniors may undermine the severity of their situation.²⁰ In thinking back to the strength and resiliency that is practiced and embodied by many senior women, how does the ability to cope through challenging times potentially result in under-representation of the reality or prevalence of women experiencing this quality of life?

The 2015 National Seniors Council Report on the Social Isolation of Seniors advocates for a healthy lifestyle to facilitate healthy aging.¹⁸ The report's concept of a healthy lifestyle involves physical activity, eating well, healthy body weight, moderate alcohol consumption, reduced stress and good sleeping habits.¹⁸ A problem with this classification of healthy aging is the lack of inclusivity of many individuals. Referring to the Social Determinants of Health⁴⁰ illuminates how these behaviours which define a healthy lifestyle are not feasible for many. For example,

income, social status, and genetics are factors which play a role in determining an individual's health. What are the consequences of promoting a healthy body weight and physical activity for a lone senior woman who has compromised mobility and is living with low-income circumstances? A critical analysis of the discourse of aging well and Aging Well programs within the 21st century underscores how focus on individual behaviours and negligence of social and culture structures will fail to meet the intended objective.¹⁶ These are critical considerations to finding strategies that mitigate isolation and foster social inclusion for aging adults. With consideration of the experience of age and support available for those who have faced social marginalization their entire lives because of their race, class, religion, weight or lifestyle, one may ask how the discourse around social inclusion of seniors to promote healthy aging is in fact perpetuating social exclusion?

The complex interplay of food, social connection, and personal health stimulates curiosity as to how cultivating social inclusion of elders through the sharing of meals can become a valued practice within communities. Studies exploring the functions of communal meals and social eating have iterated feelings of happiness, trust, and social support as an outcome of eating with others.²⁷ Furthermore, integrating education around nutrition and health in a way that understands and is rooted in intersectionality and the SDOH may be considered as an effective skill to enhance sense of agency for women who are navigating new challenges with their health, food practices and food systems.

2.5 The role of community

As the population of seniors in Nova Scotia and Canada increased, there is concern as to whether or not communities have the human, financial, and structural resources to effectively support the elderly, and how this may be achieved.² Age-friendly community initiatives work to change the physical and social environment to allow and encourage seniors to reside in their homes and within their communities as they age.² The age-friendly community strategy calls upon participation from all levels of government as well as private sectors, to support and implement frameworks, programs, and infrastructure to create environments which make community participation accessible to seniors.² In addition to physical structures such as wider walkways, well-lit areas, and accessible transportation systems, changes to the social environment are in need of review. Halifax, Nova Scotia is a participating city within the Age-Friendly Cities initiative, a 2007 project of the World Health Organization. Halifax's project report summarizes seniors' feelings about health care, transportation, housing, recreational activities and respect/social inclusion.⁵⁸ Seniors who were involved in the focus groups expressed satisfaction with social inclusivity in their communities, however the sample represented fairly "healthy, economically stable, well-educated and active seniors", who had access to transportation.⁵⁸

As focus on age-friendly communities grows, so does the rapid development and gentrification of neighbourhoods within urban areas.⁵⁹ The transformation of communities is often centered around the interests of young, urban professionals, decreasing the population of older adults.⁵⁹ There are numerous ways to define gentrification, many of which resemble "the movement into a formerly deteriorating community by middle-class or affluent residents."⁶⁰ This over-simplified definition may not encapsulate the historical relevance of race and class, and how gentrification is driven by valuing economic profit over the well-being of the traditional residents from the

formerly “deteriorating” community.⁶¹ Development of older neighbourhoods inevitably changes the demographics of the area, shifting the culture and shared values within the community.^{59,62,63} Social ties are becoming less place, or neighbourhood-based and more geographically dispersed, appealing to employed younger generations who live, work, and socialize in various areas.⁶⁴ The North End of Halifax is historically a primarily Black community which has experienced significant changes over the past decade, most of which can be classified as gentrification.^{61,63} The influx of new residents, rising real estate prices and unaffordable shops and food establishments have disrupted the vibrant and close-knit community.^{61,63} One of the most unfortunate consequences of gentrification can be displacement of residents from their neighbourhoods. In a CBC interview addressing the impact of gentrification on the social fabric of the North End Community of Halifax, a longtime resident expressed how people once congregated on their porches and stoops to communicate with their neighbours, whereas new residents “come home from work, they put their car there, they go in their door, that's it”.⁶³ Carvey’s statement reflects how communities have become less close-knit and less centered around human relationships and interactions. For seniors who have spent most of their lives in a community and do not have individual capital or desire to move elsewhere, the changing environment may no longer resemble what once felt like home. The disruption of social ties, and neighbourhood connectedness can threaten informal supports for the elderly, exacerbating the risk of social isolation and poor health outcomes.⁵⁹ It is also critical however, to highlight the sense of community and connectedness of North End Halifax that has been maintained throughout decades of change. The definition of resiliency as a characteristic of communities that is manifested as a positive outcome in the face of historical and current stresses may be considered in relation to the neighbourhood in which Hope Blooms resides.²³ Furthermore,

considering the role senior women may play in maintaining community connections is valuable.²³ Demonstrated efforts of elderly women to help preserve, memorialize or take on responsibility of political actions to address the future of meaningful places have been observed in the United States with elder African American women.²³ The strength, resilience and care for community demonstrated by senior women illuminates the important role senior women play in our communities.^{23,65}

Inclusive spaces which allow for adults to age in place with opportunities to participate in their communities requires collective participation of all ages. Interaction between multiple generations can be an effective way to enhance social capital for elders.⁶⁴ A sense of social capital reflects one's social relationships as well as the quality of resources made accessible through those relationships.⁶⁴ Reciprocity is an important component of social capital, providing mutually beneficial outcomes for communities.^{21,64} That being said, aging adults who are challenged in their ability to engage socially due to health, mobility, or economic barriers have a greater reliance on social capital and community resources than younger residents.⁶⁴

As a way to enhance social capital within communities, intergenerational spaces and programs have gained attention as a way to build more cohesive, inclusive communities and help to deconstruct ageism.⁶⁶ To enhance societal awareness of the social isolation of seniors, a discussion on the need to recreate a sense of community to encourage interactions and connections among neighbours and the larger community was brought forth by the National Seniors Council.¹⁸ One case study involving an intergenerational center assessed outcomes of youth and older adults receiving ongoing programming at the same site which catered to

preschool aged children and older adults with care needs, mainly dementia.⁶⁷ The program was predominantly beneficial, reducing duplication of services and increasing exposure to diverse individuals. Caregivers showed respect to adults and children equally, respecting their autonomy and contribution to the program.⁶⁷ The importance of intergenerational programs is understood by researchers; however, implementation or evaluation of such programs is lacking.⁶⁷ Program implementation and sustainability is often challenged by lack of resources, especially financial.⁶⁷ Furthermore, communities with less economic opportunity are often under-resourced to support the needs of their residents.⁶⁴ Although there is belief that social capital should be centered on the value of human relationships rather than economic resources, the reality that structural and financial resources are required to initiate and maintain programs cannot be ignored.^{67,68}

Community programs focused on the well-being of seniors have been evaluated to recognize barriers and promising practices. A literature review by Miller, Simpson, Buckle and Berger⁶⁶ was conducted to understand best practices for working with seniors. Building trust and a sense of belonging within a program is an essential component of their implementation.⁶⁶ Involving program participants in the program design and implementation is important to empower seniors and contributing to a sense of ownership. Additionally, understanding the needs and desires of the participants helps design a program that resonates with them and is not a one size fits all design.⁶⁶ Taking a holistic approach to program development by understanding the participants as a collection of their experiences and life factors allows us to view the aging process as a “continuity of life”.^{43(p. 385)} Additionally, the culture of care established within a community space can create a welcoming, secure and comfortable environment. The duration of a program

must be considered in order to build relationships and establish a strong sense of belonging for participants.⁶⁶

2.6 Summary

The complex and subjective nature of women's relationships to food is shaped by the history of women's roles and responsibilities to provide food for others, as well as the interplay of cultural political, social and individual factors that influence the way in which women engage with food.

Thus, women's engagement with food and food-related activities are everchanging throughout the life course and may shape women's identity and her connection to herself and others.^{4,7,30}

While aging can be viewed positively as another phase of one's life, the journey of aging can shift activities around food and present new challenges.^{14,17,19,21} The intersection of age with

gender, class, race and health informs the process of aging, manifesting for individuals in unique ways.^{54,69,70} The significant roles of caretaking and food provision may extend into some

individuals later years, yet is often diminished as household dynamics, family or personal health, or social connection changes.^{10,29} These interrelated factors which shift daily activities can

sometimes lead to social isolation, decreased activities around food, and poor health outcomes as a result.^{19,36} With the question as to how communities will support the continually increasing

population of seniors and senior women, it is hard to ignore the significance of the role of food in maintaining women identity, social interaction, and nutritional health.^{12,14,17} As sociologist

Deborah Lupton articulates "it is highly problematic to separate food preferences from social contact".^{5(p7)} Furthermore, the act of social eating which cultivates feelings of happiness and trust

of others illuminates its potential to bring people together and create relationships.²⁷ With

consideration the benefit for those who eat socially and the challenges to engage social that may

come with age, and, a bidirectional relationship is evident; how can food be used as a way to build valuable relationships and create support systems for people that may not have the opportunity to eat socially to begin with?

Understanding the historical, social and political dimensions of communities is integral to creating more age-friendly communities. To foster connection and social capital within physical spaces, which are inclusive for aging adults, trusting relationships across generations are essential.^{43,64} Creating age-friendly communities requires spaces for senior women to connect and feel nurtured and supported to live independently.^{52,59} Furthermore, understanding how senior women acknowledged and included within their communities and the opportunities or roles they may play within them should be considered.^{23,65}

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

The human experience is complex and unique for each individual. However, it can also be a shared, intersubjective experience amongst groups. A network of interrelated factors ranging from societal and structural values to personal day to day interactions influences individuals' experiences in both comparable and contrasting ways.⁵² For the participants in this research, subjective factors such as gender, age, race, food preferences and health status which appear on the individual level, are strongly influenced by structures which shape individuals' lives.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory⁴¹ was used as a framework as it represents how many interrelated factors influence individuals' realities. The framework was incorporated with the intention that meanings and themes from participants' interviews may emerge into relevant

interrelated systems of the framework. Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Systems Theory is comprised of five systems or spheres of influence that individuals interact with.^{41,52} These systems are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem.⁴¹

3.1.1 Microsystem

Microsystems are the most immediate to the participants, including settings such as home, work, and place of worship. The microsystem involves the particular roles individuals play within these settings. For example, a church volunteer, or someone's spouse or grandmother. The roles and meanings women ascribe to themselves as senior women at HB or in the community may be different for those who live alone than for those who live with a spouse or family members. For women who had spent time cooking and hosting family gatherings that were centered around food, the opportunity to share a meal at HB may resemble that time in their lives. Cooking at home could be a time of enjoyment or viewed as a chore and would therefore influence the meanings women ascribe to having a meal served to them at HB. In addition to activities around cooking, disrupted appetite and interest to prepare food can be an outcome of loneliness or depression therefore the women's social and informal support networks within their microsystems may impact how participants engage with and feel about food patterns.^{13,17}

3.1.2 Mesosystem

The mesosystem can be understood as the connections or relationships between two or more microsystems which represents the day-to-day settings of the participants.⁴¹ For example, the network of social support, health programs, or transportation that may be available for seniors with support from friends or family exist within the mesosystem.²⁰ These settings may be direct

or indirect. Hope Blooms has connections with other community organizations, professionals and academic institutions. As a group under the umbrella of Hope Blooms, Empowered Women Blossom may have increased access to resources and relationships through the organizations network, influencing their lives within their communities and in their homes.

3.1.3 Exosystem

The exosystem is described as the connection between two or more settings which do not directly include the individual but has an impact or effect on their lives.⁴¹ Transportation systems, senior governments programs, housing, and policies all exist within the exosystem.^{20,41,52} Social, political and historical factors within the community are also aspects of the exosystem which influence individuals' experiences, influencing opportunities to participate or engage socially in their community, or receive access to basic needs such as health care and food. Affordability and accessibility of food differs within communities, impacting individuals behaviours and choices around food.³³

3.1.4 Macrosystem

The fourth sphere of influence is the macrosystem, which includes the socially constructed ideologies, values, beliefs, cultures and political and economic systems.^{41,52} These forces significantly shape participants experiences on multiple levels, impacting policies and structures within the exosystem, as well as the roles and perceptions individuals have within their immediate settings.⁴¹

While aging is experienced differently for each individual, the social dimension of aging, which represents how seniors continue to participate or engage socially, is partially shaped by society's ageist views that can lead to oppression and isolation of seniors.^{38,40} Furthermore, the ideas and perceptions around taking care of oneself with age, and the responsibility placed on people to do so is an outcome of the discourse around healthy aging that is influential in how individuals perceive themselves as seniors.^{15,16,20} For those who identify as female, the power dynamics that exist within gender and patriarchal systems that influences division of labor may shapes how women may perceive themselves as senior women and the responsibilities undertaken as a result.⁶

3.1.5 Chronosystem

The final system, which encompasses all four spheres, is the chronosystem. The chronosystem accounts for the changes which occur over time and the influence of common life events or transitions.⁴¹ The chronosystem is significant in this research as individuals' interactions within the four systems, and the influence of the systems shift throughout the life course. The chronosystem can involve external events and changes such as a retirement or death of a spouse, or internal such as biological age-related changes.³⁸

4. Methodology

4.1. Introduction

To understand the participants experiences as accurately as they described them, a qualitative approach was used. The aim of this research which was to understand what gathering with fellow women of EWB for lunch means to the women. Additionally, gaining understanding of the

participants experience being a senior in the community, and their engagement with food was explored to gain deeper insight into their experience with Empowered Women Blossom.

4.2. Phenomenology

A phenomenological approach was used throughout this research. Phenomenology is driven by sense of wonder; wondering how something may present itself, or be experienced, or felt can lead to inquiry about a particular observed phenomenon.⁷¹

Inquiry through phenomenology was chosen as it seeks to give meaning to and understand the lived experiences of individuals and emphasizes the subjectivity of individual experiences.⁷¹ The phenomenon of interest in this research was what it means to the senior women who are members of Empowered Women Blossom to have a place in the community where they can gather and share a meal. The role of the researcher is to understand and describe the reality of the participants experience based on their interpretation.⁷¹ The phenomenon is therefore defined by the multiple realities and experiences of the participants, absent of any conceptualization or theorizing by the researcher.^{71,72} Phenomenology can also be thought of as the pre-reflective experience, which is the “ordinary experience that we live in and that we live through for most, if not all our day to day existence”.^{71(p. 28)} Articulated by phenomenologist Martin Heidegger, colleague of “father of phenomenology” Edmond Husserl, an alternative aspect of phenomenology is established by acknowledging the shared or codeveloped experience of humans which is shaped through the collective life experiences.⁷³ Heidegger’s perspective presents the assumption that there are core meanings or essences to a common, shared experience.⁷³ This approach was applied to the phenomenon centered in this research, with the

intention to make meaning of these experiences in a way that encompassed the depth, and uniqueness of each women's lives and how this influenced their relationship and connection to the group. The meanings the women ascribed to their experience at Hope Blooms impacted how they connected with and perceived themselves within their communities, as well as shaped their perceptions, knowledge and awareness of food and nutrition. The experiences that were inherent to aging, such as changes to household and health, influenced how women engaged with food, and how they experienced meals with EWB.

4.3. Method of inquiry

Semi-structured, individual interviewing was used as the method of inquiry to allow participants to answer openly and express what is true to them. Additional probing questions were asked to gain a deeper understanding of the participants answers that pertained to the phenomenon in question.

4.4. Research Design

4.4.1. Participants

The participants involved in this research are members of a senior women's group, *Empowered Women Blossom* (EWB) which is hosted at Hope Blooms, a youth, non-profit organization in North End Halifax. EWB started as a walking group led by a community health center dietitian and founder of Hope Blooms. The majority of the group are from Nova Scotia, and many reside in the North End of Halifax. The group is diverse with regards to age, culture, ethnicity, marital status and living arrangements. The women are between ages 65 and 85, a couple of which have spouses they live with, however most women are either widowed, single or separated, and two

have a grandchild living with them. The women live in various places of residence; houses, public housing, apartments, and apartment complexes specific to seniors. Over fifty percent of the EWB group are of African Nova Scotian decent. Of the five participating women, one woman is indigenous and African Nova Scotian, two women are Caucasian, and two are of African Nova Scotian decent. Many of the women volunteer their time with their church and other community groups. Individual participant descriptions provided by the participants themselves are found in section 5, Results and Discussion.

4.4.2. Description of Hope Blooms

The foundation of Hope Blooms originated from a community health center dietitians' observation of the presence of food insecurity within North End Halifax, partly due to the absence of adequate food outlets and low-income circumstances faced by community residents. The founder/executive director also began to observe how racialized youth were treated within public spaces and wanted to build a platform which enabled youth to create change in their communities growing local, organic food for their community and running a social entrepreneurship that creates opportunities for post-secondary education through a scholarship program. Hope Blooms was a way for the youth to step into their power create change and also ultimately worked to dismantle systems of oppression and facilitate change in how youth, especially Black youth and youth of colour are perceived, treated and disenfranchised in communities.

Empowered Women Blossom are the senior's group who gather weekly on Thursday afternoons at Hope Blooms with attendance often varying from five to eight members. The session involves

lunch and socializing, as well as intermittent nutrition education and cooking demonstrations, or other workshops led by interns and guests. The women also create and sell Afrocentric greeting cards during the holiday season and support other organizations or individuals in the neighbourhood via donations.

4.4.3. Role of researcher at Hope Blooms

I (the primary researcher) became involved with Hope Blooms through an administrative internship placement as part of the Internship Education Program at Mount Saint Vincent University in April 2018. In addition to assisting with meal planning, food inventory and purchasing, monthly financials, grant writing and community event planning, preparing lunch and facilitating nutrition education included within my role as a dietetic intern. After completing the internship, I continued to work with Empowered Women Blossom on Thursdays, which was followed by another internship rotation as a community placement. Following completion of the community placement I was hired as a full-time employee for the summer of 2019, continuing with Empowered Women Blossom once a week after returning to school the following September.

4.4.4. Recruitment

Recruitment was a unique process given the relationship established with participants whom were the reason this research topic came to fruition. The participants knew about the research from the beginning and had been aware of conference presentations in which information about EWB and forthcoming research was shared. Recruitment occurred during one of the weekly EWB sessions. A letter of information (Appendix A) was given to each participant which was then read aloud by me. The women were told they did not have to participate, and their choice

would not affect their relationships with myself, Hope Blooms, or other members of EWB. To keep participation confidential, all women were asked to take an envelope home, and return it regardless of their choice to participate. Those who agreed to participate returned their consent form with a signature and contact information and those who chose not to, returned the form crossed out. Eliminating any sense of pressure to participate was a critical part of the recruitment process. The executive director of Hope Blooms was available in case the women had any questions or concerns. Those who chose to participate were contacted via their provided contact information to set up an interview at the time and place of their choice. Three participants chose to sign their consent form the same day as distribution, which was placed in the envelope and stored in a larger folder within a locked drawer. Six signed consent forms were returned. Inclusion criteria were members of Empowered Women Blossom who provided written consent to participate, with exclusion criteria being those who are not part of Empowered Women Blossom.

4.5. Data collection

Interviewing is a method of data collection used within qualitative research.⁷⁴ Individual, face-to-face interviews took place with the intention to eliminate the influence of group dynamics and allow for greater engagement between the participant and researcher. Ensuring safety of the participant given the potential emotional or personal topics that could emerge was a priority. Five interviews took place, and the sixth interview did not occur due to the unfortunate circumstances related to the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, enforcing social distancing and restriction of non-essential contact.

The participants chose the location of their interviews, which was then agreed upon by both parties. Locations of the interview included one woman's home, the North End Branch Library, and three different coffee shops. Pilot interviews did not take occur prior to interviewing.

Interviews were 45 minutes to an hour and 45 minutes long. At the beginning of the interview the purpose of the research was communicated. The participants choice to have the recorder turned off, terminate the interview, or withdraw completely at any time with immediate deletion from the audio recorder was reiterated prior to starting. Five main questions (Appendix B) helped guide the interview. Additional probing questions were incorporated to allow for deeper elaboration and discussion of topics relevant to the explored literature. No note taking took place during the interview in order to remain fully engaged with the participant and foster a conversational style interview. Immediately after the interview, notes were taken which included any thoughts, feelings, or questions that had surfaced. These notes, or memos served as a reference to recall what had happened in each interview and to reflect on any biases or preconceptions that were present and could be mindfully eliminated to proceed forward. Reflecting was a critical process to ensure bracketing was practiced continuously and as effectively as possible.

Once interviews were transcribed, member checking occurred. Due to the restrictions related to COVID-19, a face-to-face follow up was not feasible thus participants received a password protected copy of their transcription via e-mail. Participants were able to eliminate, clarify or modify any statement within their interview. Four participants participated in member checking (one woman did not feel it was necessary) and no revisions were made to the original transcripts.

After receiving her transcript, one participant felt she expressed herself more effectively in writing than speaking. The participant requested the original interview questions, which were sent to her to answer and returned via e-mail. The participant gave permission for both the oral and written interview to be used for data explication.

4.6. Data storage

All interviews were transcribed within two weeks after they occurred. The transcripts were completed and stored within MaxQDA software. Written field notes were digitized and input to MaxQDA and backed up onto OneDrive. Hard copies were destroyed, while all electronically stored data was password protected. Interviews were labelled based off the pseudonym chosen by the participant.

4.7. Data explication

Staying true to the phenomenological methodology utilized within the research process required continual reflection and bracketing of preconceptions to avoid preemptively drawing hypotheses and conclusions. Continuous questioning throughout the entire process rather than seeking conclusions was a key focus.

There were six main steps covered during the explication which were the procedures taken to identify features, relationships and themes of the data.⁷⁵

- 1) *Bracketing and reduction*: Listening to and re-reading the interview while checking in with personal bias and attempting to withhold any personal responses occurred.

- 2) *Revisiting the interview*: The interviews were listened to and read again to get a sense of the interview in its entirety with an additional focus on non-verbal cues, pauses, emphasis or repetition.
- 3) *Finding units of meaning*: The third phase involved going through details of each interview and highlighting statements, or units of meaning within each interview. This process occurred without taking the phenomenon into consideration, and any statements that were unclear or did not present a specific meaning were included.
- 4) *Clustering units of meaning*: Units of meaning were then clustered into similar categories within the context of the phenomena. Direct quotes were included. Differentiating between similar statements was also included in this process.
- 5) *Theming*: Clusters of units were then organized into themes and any unique statements or voices that did not belong into themes were highlighted. Redundancy in quotes or meanings were eliminated.
- 6) *Summarizing*: The main themes were organized into a final report that included the main objectives of the research and resonated with the literature and background to support the explored phenomena. The discussion section was integrated throughout the participants quotes, and the themes. Themes were then integrated into a summary of each individual interview to be sent to participants to ensure their interviews were captured with truth and accuracy and served as a narrative of their experiences.⁷⁵

4.8. Ethical considerations

This research project was approved by the University Research Ethics Board. To maintain privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms chosen by the participants were used and no identifying

information was revealed. Only the researcher had access to identifying information as well as the interview transcripts. Participants were informed of their right to terminate the interview at any time and provided written consent for participation. Given the uniqueness of the group and public knowledge about Hope Blooms as an organization, participants were informed that their names and other identifying information would not be disclosed, however 100% confidentiality was not feasible. Participation was kept anonymous from the other women, with all members asked to return their consent for whether they chose to participate or not.

The letter of information was read aloud to the participants during recruitment, with key points reiterated at the beginning of each interview. All audio and written files were password protected and stored on a password protected laptop, stored in a private room within the researcher's home. Potential for sensitive and emotional topics to surface was prepared for. Women were made aware of the support systems available to them, and participants who disclosed sensitive information during the interview were contacted afterwards.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Introduction

The participants interviewed independently, sharing what being part of Empowered Women Blossom meant to them; which included memorable moments of laughter and togetherness. Women also shared personal life stories, some of which included traumatic past experiences of violence or abuse. Incorporating Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory ⁴¹ as a framework encouraged a critical awareness of each participant as their own entity, to prevent interpreting the women's experiences as one homogenous group. The individuality of each woman came to life

through their interviews, while simultaneously revealing a special connection and shared identity as a group.

Through the data explication process, common themes emerged, and unique voices were highlighted. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory offers a framework which was used throughout data explication, helping to delineate and make sense of the interconnected influences within women's immediate and extended social and political environments.^{41,52} While phenomenological methodology was used to understand individuals' realities exactly how they are experienced, the framework was implemented to interpret the complexity of the women's realities and how they are shaped by their environment at various levels.^{73,75} Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory and its five spheres of influence served as a reminder that one's experiences do not occur in isolation or separate from external influences and events. Briefly, the theory's application to my analysis is as follows:

The microsystem represented the immediate environments of the women such as their homes, Hope Blooms, their community, and church. Connection between two or more microsystems, known as the mesosystem, facilitated understanding of how women's various roles within their immediate environments interact. External influences such as transportation, access to grocery stores, and the political climate of North End Halifax, represented the exosystem, which shaped women's lived experiences as seniors but did not directly include them. The ideologies that are major forces in how individuals participate and view their place in society was characterized by the macrosystem. Given the focus of aging within this research, the societal constructs of aging emerged as a significant factor and stereotype against which the women resisted. The influence of

the chronosystem, or the events and changes that happen over time, was significant throughout the data explication as women talked about their pasts and presents, illustrating how the micro-, meso, exo- and macrosystems evolve as individuals move through their lives.

In addition to the theoretical framework, the experiences the participants brought forth in their interviews encouraged the inclusion of additional theories and modes of thinking to consider the deeper social and political factors that are embedded within and inform how the spheres assert their influence. Critical feminist gerontology which acknowledges the intersection of age, and gender provided a lens to frame some of the participants experiences, especially within a community setting.²⁴ Intersectionality, which investigates how race, class, gender, sexuality, age, religion and citizenship intersect and result in constraints, opportunities or marginalization based on social and political power structures was also fundamental to contextualize the participants experiences.⁷⁶ Intersectionality also served to broaden the understanding of participants engagement with food and consider the inequitable power within food systems.⁷⁷ Health, which seems inherent to the topic of food and food practices, brought forth the incorporation of healthism and nutritionism to understand how these ideologies influence the way women perceive and construct their diet and food choices. Healthism, is defined as the “preoccupations with personal health as a primary focus for the achievement of well-being that is attained through modification of lifestyles”⁷⁸ whereas nutritionism is the reduction of foods nutritional value to its individual nutrients.⁷⁹ Nutritionism and healthism often coexist as individuals believe their health is tied to making proper food choices.

5.2. Description of participants

The following are descriptions of participants written by the participants themselves.

Rose: I am a member of the African Nova Scotian Community, widowed at age 44, and raised two children while working as a Social Worker for over 30 years, I retired when I was 55. I enjoy spending time socializing with other seniors and volunteering with numerous organizations and groups whenever I can. I also enjoy gardening and experimenting with food for family.

Shayla: I am a senior citizen, and a single mother of three, a grandmother of six, and great grandmother of two. I raised my children and helped to raise my grandchildren. I live in the North End of Halifax, love to sing, and sing in a choir. I speak up for my community and am very proud of where I live. I am of African descent, and a Christian who loves to praise god. Let's all help to make this world a better place.

Maude: I am a 77-year old woman, a mother, grandmother and great grandmother. My heritage is African Nova Scotian and Indigenous and I have lived in Halifax for 60 years. I live with my husband and spend much of my time walking, knitting or watching tennis and golf.

Edna: I am a 68-year-old retired woman and have spent most of my life in Halifax. I have lived an independent life, working to take care of myself since she was a teenager. I live with the notion that although I am female, I do not have to conform to how society beliefs a female should be. I am interested in photography and enjoy getting outside to take photos.

Betty: I am a 65-year-old female, born and raised in Halifax, and retired from the federal government. I am a mother of a daughter and son and grandmother to four grandchildren. I enjoy

camping, cottaging and day trips across the Maritimes. I love working with and encouraging the youth of Hope Blooms and am a professional volunteer.

5.3. Table of themes and subthemes

Through data explication of the five interviews, three main themes emerged which are conveyed by the women’s direct quotes. The themes are further organized through subheadings, which are also articulated through the words of the participants.

Table of themes and subthemes from data explication of participants interviews

Themes	Subthemes	Supporting quotes
Experiencing a sense of belonging	Being a part of Hope Blooms	“and then I walk in and give everybody a hug, and everybody just embraces you
	Being part of an intergenerational space	“those young women, when I met with them...they just give you a burst of energy
	Being part of Empowered Women Blossom	“Every day is not going to be a laughing day, but we get through it you know. And sometimes, most times, being in a group helps.”
The importance of community	Being a senior in the community	“I still feel like I could do stuff and be useful in some way.”
	Preserving the true meaning of community	“...it’s not just a word, it’s people coming together...celebrating, not celebrating...you know, something that’s happening. You need community.”
Food, health, and aging	Eating together and learning together	“We’ll try anything, you know what I mean? and its new experiences and new way of looking at things and eating things.”
	Navigating nutrition and health information	“I’m really struggling because I don’t know what I should be eating”

The impact of being alone

“Yeah you know when you live alone, you don’t want to cook...anything”

5.4. Experiencing a sense of belonging: “They feel that sense of family, they feel that sense they belong to someone”

A sense of belonging, or belongingness can be understood as the human emotional need to be an accepted member of a group, and is integral to quality of life.⁸⁰ The sense of belonging associated with attending the Empowered Women Blossom (EWB) sessions was integral to having lunch together. The women expressed a sense of belonging and connection through their relationships with the executive director (ED), staff, and youth of Hope Blooms (HB) as well as fellow members of the group. These relationships that exist within HB, can be understood as a microsystem within the women’s lives and seemed to be influential in how the women felt about themselves and their community. The authentic, human connections cultivated within the space created an atmosphere where the women felt inspired, energized, and a part of something they believed in.

5.4.1. Being part of Hope Blooms: “*and then I walk around and give everybody a hug, and everybody just embraces you*”

For some women, it seemed that the depth of relationships and the loving environment of HB created a sense of acceptance and belonging that was unparalleled to what is experienced in day to day life. The warm and welcoming environment created by the ED and the staff was notable for EWB. Feeling welcomed meant feeling loved, happy and safe.

The ED, who is a welcoming and influential member of the North End community seemed to have a significant impact on the group. In one interview, Shayla mentioned how without the ED, “there is no Hope Blooms”. Edna expressed her appreciation for the ED who she described “has a spirit which brings people together”, while Rose spoke to the love she receives when she walks in.

“When I think of Hope Blooms and I think of Empowered Women and I walk in the door, and if she [the ED] is there, she says "Hi Rose!" It just makes you feel so warm, and then you (long pause) at least for me it makes me feel really warm and welcoming, and then I walk around and give everybody a hug, and everybody just embraces you.”

Seeing the tears well up as Rose spoke contextualized the depth of this experience for her. She mentioned how you do not receive this type of welcoming too often as people are sort of “standoff-ish” as you get older. For Rose this interaction that she attributed to walking into HB, seems to be an encounter she can depend on in her life that consistently reminds her she belongs. Rose talked about the physical connection shared at HB, that to her was a symbol of love.

“When you're in that group, you go around the table, you get everybody- whether they want to or not, they might stiffen up but they're always willing to embrace you and that- to me, we don't hug enough. Because a hug means love, and I like that. So that's what keeps me coming back”

The affectionate interactions and welcoming between staff and EWB were particularly meaningful to Rose. Affectionate touch can promote well-being, reduce stress, and result in felt

inclusion or felt security.⁸¹ For women who live alone as a result of bereavement or children leaving the house, loss of consistent connection and physical contact is a common outcome.⁴⁵ To Rose, who grew up in a big family, raised children of her own and now lives alone, a simple hug is symbolic of love and can be profound. The benefit of spaces such as HB where women feel acknowledged and loved unconditionally may be particularly meaningful as lone women navigate their way through life's changes. It seemed that the loving atmosphere was almost tangible and was foundational to belonging. Shayla described how the close, family-like atmosphere was created at HB.

“There's only one thing that can create that kind of feeling, and that kind of atmosphere, its only love. There's nothing, there's nothing else that could create it, nothing else that- its, it's the love that people have for each other. And you know them warm feelings...that's, that's what it is.”

Maude stated similar, positive sentiments of how the HB staff makes her feel, expressing that as long as she sees the staff at Hope Blooms, “I'm okay, I'm good”. During her interview, Maude had shared some of the incredible hardships she faced and overcame throughout her life such as abuse and discrimination. She explained that you can tell when you are not in a good atmosphere, but at HB she felt she could relax.

“Yeah...it's more about the people, because you (the staff) just make it lovely. You make us feel...make me anyway, 'cause I don't smile much, so. People look at me and say, "why do you not smile?", well I got nothing to smile about. You know? I ain't going around smiling for nothing. It's just, I don't know...I don't know, it's just a lot. But I love Hope Blooms, I love it. We do our thing in there, we do our stuff, it's fun.”

It seemed that HB was a place of joy to carry Maude through the hardships of day-to-day life where close relationships she has with the staff may be less prominent in other environments she occupies. Gathering at HB also seemed to be a time when the women could relax in what Shayla and Betty described as a safe place.

Rose's statement of how the welcoming she received kept her coming back, paired with the importance of seeing the staff for Maude, illuminated what made HB so special in their community. Community program sustainability is often evaluated through financial and structural resources,⁵⁹ in this case, it is evident how HB is more than a space that hosts senior women for lunch. The value of human relationships created in community is an invaluable contributor to the sustainability and what keeps people coming through the door.⁶⁴ For EWB, going to Hope Blooms meant stepping into a comfortable, welcoming place with opportunity to develop and nurture meaningful, loving relationships.

5.4.2. Being part of an intergenerational space: “A burst of energy”

Although EWB is its own entity under the umbrella of Hope Blooms, some of the women talked about EWB's presence, and how HB was not just a physical space they occupied, but a space they were part of. Some of the women talked about how they related with the youth at the HB space. The connection across generations manifested in various ways; creating family-like environments, building respectful relationships, and serving as inspiration for the seniors. The roles which the youth and seniors occupied within their immediate environment at Hope Blooms appeared to be partially influenced by their age differences. However, the way women valued or

perceived these roles was also informed by larger, social forces. The perception of seniors by younger generations was a thread in how the women recognized and appreciated their relationship with the youth. A sense of reciprocity emerged as women talked about feeling valuable to the youth who came to them for guidance and support. In turn, the women felt respected and inspired by the youth. For some cultures and communities such as the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, now referred to as Canada by settlers, turning to seniors or elders for guidance, and showing respect is a cultural norm.^{67,82} For others however, families do not live as close together as they once did, and youth and seniors have become more disparate over time with mutual respect and acknowledgement diminishing.^{19,67,83}

One participant talked about the respect they received from the youth who looked at them as the “grandmotherly type” who they came to for advice. “Walking into a house like you’re going to visit someone” or “going into a noisy home with a bunch of kids” were used to describe this atmosphere. For Rose, the connection with the female youth of HB provided a bridge to earlier years when her daughter lived at home and often had friends around. The young girls provided opportunity for Rose to relive her youth with questions of what it was like when she was 16 and in high school.

“Yeah, those young women um, when I met with them...they just give you a burst of energy...it helps you relive your youth. So therefore, it’s a burst of um...um, enjoyment to know that they’re interested in what you did. And so yeah that’s... if we can help them in any way, I think it’s wonderful that we can support those young girls.”

The interconnections between Rose's home life and time at HB illuminated how these two settings overlapped to shape her relationship with the youth and provided energy as well as comfort and familiarity. A deeper sense of purpose in one's life may also precipitate from the sense of being needed or wanted by the youth⁶⁷ who have asked for the women's support with certain projects. Rose felt that the youth appreciated support from the seniors, and also talked about the value of receiving their respect.

“They, like I said they give back to me just with their love and their respect. I mean, I think that if you grow up with respect, these young girls are looking to respect us, the elders. You grew up with that respect, you keep it. You don't go astray from that, you know. You may go astray in your lifestyle of what you do, but you always have that respect.”

To Rose, it seemed that showing respect to those who are older creates a rapport and sense of security in having someone to count on or confide in when you're in need. For Shayla, respect for seniors was something she felt was diminishing in our society. She acknowledged and appreciated the respect received from the youth of HB.

“We might not hear them say all the time, and it might not seem like it... but I'm sure that we have an impact with the younger people, because I will notice all the respect they have for us as the seniors. And they listen, and they like to hear our stories, so you know, I think it's good for both sides, like it's a, it's still a learning process for them and it's a safe haven for us”

As Rose and Shayla talked about respect as a learning opportunity for the youth, it seemed that demonstrating their role as an elder fostered a sense of value. Intergenerational connections at

HB created opportunities for the women to give back with their wisdom and experience.⁸⁴ Shayla's statement highlights the reciprocity of their relationship with the youth, and how their role as respected seniors was something that the women noticed and felt without it being explicitly indicated by the youth. Her words "safe haven" prompted the question of whether feeling unsafe is something these women experience in their lives. In addition to feeling included and respected, feeling safe in one's community may be a noteworthy outcome of multigenerational spaces and age inclusion.⁸⁵ It is worth considering how EWBs role as seniors at HB where they feel acknowledged may impact their perception of themselves within the larger community.⁶⁴

Respectful relationships were also observed between the youth. Betty talked about the cultural, ethnic and religious diversity of the youth and how Hope Blooms has built a foundation of inclusion and respect.

"Hope Blooms has had all different kids; Korean, Black, Muslim, Caucasian. We have had many, many kids flow through there, and just gel with each other because in the atmosphere of HB and outside, you know they're taught, we have to respect each other and respect each other's views and um, that goes a long way..."

Many women have watched Hope Blooms grow and have been a part of the organization since it began over 12 years ago. Throughout each interview, it became increasingly evident how the multigenerational space impacted the women in different ways. Betty talked about how the dynamic between youth and seniors have begun to shift over time as the youth have grown up. She mentioned how the seniors are treated "like gold" recalling how the youth have developed

their food literacy skills over time and began to cook special meals for the seniors. The youth would often seek women's input of what should be served at community suppers and events.

“You know they cook for us, they've made senior meals for us or special meals or made little special things and that helps, like you know, for a lot of people when they're alone, right, and their kids are grown and gone, and the grandkids are grown and gone, you know it's always a special place or a special day, you know.”

Betty's narrative of the opportunities to come together for community meals suggested how time spent at Hope Blooms may overlap with the women's home life, both past and present. This also highlighted the function of food as a way to bring people together, and how Hope Blooms may have replicated or been reminiscent of the energy that was once part of the women's home and filled a gap for seniors who live alone.

It's important to consider that not all individuals home lives and ideas of family reflect the nuclear family unit and gathering for community meals may mean something totally different. For Edna, who does not have children, being around the youth led her to think about her experience as a child, thinking that if she had had a place like Hope Blooms when she was a child that maybe life would have been different for her. The intergenerational interactions seemed to trigger some uncomfortable memories as she shared stories of being in foster care and struggled to feel a sense of belonging in school and at home. Yet, there was a fondness for the youth and captivation being in their presence.

“I find myself being distracted from the group, into being more...looking over here and just looking at the interactions of the young people and seeing how they’re interacting. And I can see the hugging and the caring and stuff like that and it’s like, I just feel my heart it gets all mushy, watching them interact with each other, and thinking, that’s a beautiful thing.

Not having children influenced how Edna viewed her life, as well as her place in Hope Blooms. She felt she didn’t fit in with youth because of her age, but also didn’t feel she fit in with those her age.

“I think maybe if I had children, I'd probably have a different mental attitude on life. I probably would have matured differently than how I've- you know, I’ve been kind of self-centred. I guess I’ve taken on that role because it’s my responsibility to take care of myself. And... and still, that overriding thing so I don’t have to be a bother to anybody else. You know it keeps overriding everything... is to take care of myself.”

Edna’s perspective of the youth and her own childhood embodies how an individual’s past largely influences their experiences or identity into their senior years.⁴³ It is a reminder that aging is complex and dynamic experience, and women are a collection of their inter-subjectivities.²⁵ For senior women such as Edna, whose sexual orientation does not reflect the heteronormative standard, connecting in community space is embodied differently.⁶⁹ Concern of fitting in seemed to be part of her experience as a woman whose identity is not constructed around being a mother and having children. Edna’s experience represents what is known about the intersections of age with sexuality, race, and class which exacerbates social isolation.^{69,70} For those who identify as

LGBTQIA2S+ social isolation may have been experienced for much of their lives and can become exacerbated or further complicated with age.^{40,69}

With consideration of how opportunities for intergenerational interactions have diminished over time, Edna's observation of the youth underlined how meaningful diverse spaces can be.⁸⁵ For an individual like Edna who lives alone in a seniors' apartment building, sharing space and interacting with younger generations at HB may be an opportunity that is not experienced otherwise, and can enhance feeling of self-worth.⁸⁵ Opportunities to connect with youth and gain a sense of respect and partnership may also shape the culture of the community in how it supports its aging population.^{82,86} Strengthened community connections seemed to be an outcome of the culture and collective work of HB which recognized the importance of senior representation.⁸² Betty talked about the organization's teamwork over the years and felt that being involved enhanced her awareness of what is going on in the community.

“Being with empowered women means that we, we work together, we were part of seeing Hope Blooms bloom...as it's done. And we've seen young children come in there and just blossom, and um you know, their self-esteem rise and you know and it affects the atmosphere, you know and it affected us, you know what I mean so...we kind of feed off of them and make every week a new week and...you know something exciting is always going on you know what I mean, and we catch up on all community events and whose doing what in the community and that type of thing so, it means a lot.”

The inclusivity of Hope Blooms that Betty and others described seemed to contribute to the growth of the organization and the relationships within it. The notion of reciprocity once again

emerged as Betty expressed how the atmosphere and the seniors are influenced by the energy of the youth.

The broader impact of the intergenerational cohesion and unity at Hope Blooms and how this may establish a culture where the youth and seniors resist societal constructs of age is worth examining.⁸² Through these relationships and the dismantling of ageism comes positive health outcomes and access to resources.⁶⁴ Age friendly social environments can create opportunities for seniors by reducing the need or amount of formal assistance required to meet ones needs.^{58,64,87} For example, transportation to doctor's appointments, and provision of groceries in times of need such as COVID-19 are examples of how staff and older youth of HB have helped mitigate barriers to accessing health resources and care.

The absence and even deconstruction of ageism was further exemplified through forming reciprocal relationships;⁸² allowing women to reconnect to their youth, while simultaneously feeling acknowledged and respected in their identity as a senior. Involvement with the youth also seemed to enable EWB to re-define and diversify what it means to be a senior, diverging from the status quo. The idea that you can do anything, at any age was a life lesson that one of the women had learned from watching the youth overtime. With regard to the representation of senior women, a frame of reference to how the women view or represent themselves may be formed through relationship to others, which in this case was the organization of Hope Blooms.²⁵ More specifically, community participation and activism is an avenue for women to negotiate their identities as elders, thus their position as a knowledgeable elder within a youth organization that creates radical social change and aims for social equity in their community may construct a positive association and presentation of age.⁶⁵

5.4.3. Being part of Empowered Women Blossom: *“Every day is not going to be a laughing day, but we get through it you know. And sometimes, most times, being in a group helps.”*

A sense of comfort was shared by many women as they talked about their relationships within EWB. The EWB sessions are held at lunch time, however food was not explicitly mentioned by the participants. Rather, it was the social aspect of the time spent together that was highlighted. The light-hearted, and open nature of EWB as well as differences within their personalities, life experiences and opinions stood out to some women. Descriptions such as “hard fast old ladies”, and “strong women” were also used as women told stories. The authenticity of the group as they discussed the resiliency of its members provided a narrative that is different from how senior women are sometimes portrayed. The benefit of being around others to overcome life’s hardships seemed to outweigh times of tension that some women shared. EWB overcame physical distance, bad days, personal trauma and challenges, weather, and illness or injury to show up each week.

The group of Empowered Women Blossom reflected the youth, in that they are a diverse group that acknowledged and respected each other’s differences. Some women seemed to be grateful to spend time with a group of women whom had differing opinions and ways of living than their own. Shayla talked about how she felt Empowered Women Blossom provided a unique experience.

“...well I think that the difference probably being, is that everybody, everyone comes from a different space. That’s, I think the difference. There's hardly any of us that are there that are... maybe one or two of us that go that have had the same experiences and whatever, but then there’s other people’s lives that are so different...that you know, to be involved in this little group, but, everyone is just so different and unique in their own way... and it works, you know that’s the thing, it works...”

The fact that individuals are a collection of their subjective experiences seemed to be both acknowledged and accepted within the group. A couple of the women were honest that bringing a group of ladies together isn’t always perfect and tension can arise at times. The uniqueness of the group as described by the women presents it as a microsystem which reflects the senior population, who are at times incorrectly thought of as a homogenous group based on age.¹⁶ Betty also highlighted how the group is comprised of 12 differing personalities, yet the women get to know each other and understand when “things are good and when things are not so good.”

Shayla talked about the authenticity of the women, expressing that staying true to who you are is important. Gathering with EWB was perhaps alternative from the usual expectations and focus for aging women in society, where more attention is paid to signs of aging such as menopause, graying, wrinkling, and changing bodies, rather than experiences, participation and learning.²⁴ The women could be raw and real about their lives and issues they care about. As articulated by Betty:

“We just want to come together, laugh and talk, talk about the community, rage about the politicians, you know break bread together and have a meal and learn something that day”.

Being oneself and being around many personalities also meant having to “bare each other” as put by one woman. However, having a safe place where one can be genuine appeared to be important as some women iterated how life isn’t easy and bad days are inevitable. While participants did not share personal details on hard days experienced recently, for some women past experiences of discrimination, racism, sexual abuse, neglect and violence seemed to shape their perception of life and the necessity to cope and take care of themselves. While many definitions of resilience exist, the idea of resilience as emotional stamina was sensed throughout some of the interviews.⁴⁷ There appeared to be an overall acceptance of adversity, however having access to, and spending time with a group was perhaps more meaningful on harder days and helped build resilience.

“You know, we get along, we have our own personalities and we get along and, we don’t harbour any- you know there’s no bad feelings or anything, we just, we have our days, everyone has their day. Every day is not going to be a laughing day, but we get through it you know. And sometimes, most times, being in a group helps.”

Having a support system through times of adversity can strengthen relationships between people and enhance both sense of self and belonging.⁸⁸ For Shayla, time spent together was fulfilling beyond the two-hour session.

“The mood is different because usually you're leaving because your happy or you're laughing about something that was spoke during the conversation, and then you're like you know, then you kind of can’t wait to get back home again because now you've spent that [day], you've had a good

day. That's the thing...you've had this good day, and it kind of keeps you until the next time you meet, you know.”

Shayla's experience of the weekly sessions that bring fulfillment into the rest of her week exemplified the power of human connection and social relationships in carrying you through the days that may or may not always be eventful and happy. Furthermore, the sense of contentment to return to one's home after a day well spent could be important for women who look forward to getting out of their homes and overcome barriers to do so. For Edna, one of these barriers was the long-term challenges she has communicating and socializing with others. The word *empowered* in Empowered Women Blossom drew her in, as she had the desire to do something productive within the community. Despite sometimes feeling like every week is the first time she joins the group; she continues to show up every Thursday.

“I am aware of my weaknesses when it comes to relating to people. I put myself in these situations in hopes of learning how to communicate and socialize with others....”

“I take a long time to know people and to let myself belong anywhere or let myself get more involved in other people's personal lives.”

Although Edna expressed insecurities about her voice and communication skills, she continued to come to EWB week after week hoping to overcome obstacles she has experienced since she was young. There is deeper personal and historical context to Edna's situation, yet her experience suggests how Hope Blooms established a space that feels safe to attend. Those who have experienced past trauma and hardships can be pushed into the margins and be at a higher

risk of social isolation with age.⁷⁰ Establishing secure, safe places to include participants who are vulnerable and in need of support requires a culture of care which seems to be reflected in the atmosphere of Hope Blooms.⁶⁶

The caring and supportive nature of the group was also noteworthy as other women talked about one of the group members, Maude, whom had had a knee replacement. Rose talked about how the women made sure Maude had transportation and comfortable seating to continue to attend the group. This particular situation also caused Betty and Rose to reflect on the age differences within the group. Having close relationships with women of differing ages seemed to influence how women thought about or anticipated aging. Observing the age-related challenges was encouraging for some of the younger women and ensured support for the older women. As one of the younger women in the group, Betty mentioned how she was affected by Maude's resiliency after her knee surgery.

“'Cause like these are tough women, look at Maude she's had two knee replacements, and I don't know what the recovery time is but four weeks later she's getting off the bus two stops from Hope Blooms so she can exercise her leg, and then her other one! You know, and I... like I'm the youngest and I'm 64, but I look up to them and like were talking and that and the things they get over, like the humps they get over, so like it encourages me.”

“I look up to them and the things they get over, like the humps they get over, so it encourages me to say, "I can do that", you know what I mean. If she can do it at her age, I can do it at my age”

Maude was a source of inspiration for Betty and perhaps other women as well. It is worth considering how EWB as a network of support within the women's microsystem influences how women navigate their way through personal age-related events. Thursday afternoons with EWB was a consistent gathering Maude could return to after her surgery and be cared for. Having scheduled group time also allowed her to get out of her house and rehabilitate her knee. Maude's lived experiences, personal characteristics, and adversity she has faced has likely informed the "hard fast old lady" description provided by Betty. In addition, social actions such as networking amongst women may encourage aging individuals to overcome challenges and build resilience.⁸⁸ Whether Maude was aware of it or not, her perseverance inspired and encouraged some of the others within the group. For Rose, this experience also prompted her to think about what she could potentially face in the future.

"But I think okay um...am I going to have a knee surgery? am I going to have...you know, these are the things I look at and am I'm thinking 'oh god, I don't want to grow old' but, you know. So, the hip surgery the knee surgery, I don't have any...knock on wood, I don't have any health issues right now."

While gathering for lunch may serve as the invitation for EWB to come through the door at HB, it also created space for the women to connect and collectively experience the realities of aging. Betty talked about some of the topics that surface during group time.

Well, we just connect as women. And you know women's issues and what could benefit our lives. Our group are seniors, and so there's a lot in there with uh, you know seniors we talk about doctors and waiting lists, and um we talk about families, um we talk about things going on in the

community that we agree or disagree with. Everyone has their own autonomy, and it's good to hear from everybody...sort of like a women's talk show. Although everybody talks sometimes together, we um, we have a good time."

EWB's shared identity as women and as senior women seemed to be a point of connection and unity. To Betty, having a space where they could talk about issues or interests relevant to their lived experience as senior women was an important part of gathering. Using critical feminist gerontology as a lens to acknowledge the power dynamics within gender and how it shapes the experience of aging can provide a different context of the value of this space the women held.⁴⁴ Having their own space and time where their voices can be heard and discussions around current political issues and the world can be had may be particularly meaningful and powerful for senior women who are often undermined in these types of conversations both in part due to their gender, age and even race.⁴⁴ The feeling of becoming invisible is sometimes used to describe the experience of aging as a woman, with inequitable gender-based power often invalidating senior women, including their recognition, authority and power.²⁴

With regard to social isolation, the fact that many women live alone was mentioned multiple times by one participant, who stated that Thursday may be the first or only time some of the women socialize throughout the week. Having a regular commitment to look forward meant more than just getting out of the house.

"Everyone I think probably feels the same way, they feel the same way, they feel that sense of family, they feel that sense they belong to someone...that's the group, us. And... then, like I said I

think everyone looks forward to Thursdays to be part of that because I've seen, you know, rain, sleet or hail, people will show up.”

Unique differences between the EWB members also shone through as women talked about their perspectives related to group time which varied from personal challenges, wanting to accomplish more within the group, or wanting to grow closer. While the group identified as senior women, the differences in personalities and welcoming in arriving at the space through good and bad days is a reminder that aging is another phase of life that is impacted by earlier life influences.⁴⁴

5.5. The importance of community: *“I love the community that I'm in so, being a part of empowered women just shows me that there's still things that we still can do that... to be a part of this community.”*

The women's perspectives of community were multifaceted, and the term community was used in a few ways. The community women talked about was primarily within the North End of Halifax where Hope Blooms is located within the parameters of Cogswell, North Park, North and Brunswick Street, as well as within women's specific neighbourhoods such as Uniacke Square. The term community was also talked about within the context of having shared values, support, and connection rather than just a group of people living in the same area. Some women felt the true sense of community was becoming lost and contributing to and engaging with community was important to them. For some, the perceptions of being part of the community was contextualized by societal forces responsible for the assumptions or expectations that come along with being a senior woman.⁴⁷ Common ageist stereotypes which devalue seniors and depict them as inconsequential⁴⁷ seemed to be something the women were aware of yet resisted. As women

mentioned structural changes and the organization of the community within the North End of Halifax, it became clear that some women felt seniors had few opportunities to stay engaged and were not prioritized within these changes.

5.5.1. Being a senior in the community: *“I still feel like I could do stuff and be useful in some way.”*

The way women talked about their involvement in community was informed by the influence of time, with significant transitions such as retirement impacting how they viewed their contribution to their world.^{45,88} Edna was particularly poignant in describing how she felt as she was getting older and no longer working. Early in the interview, she described feeling a sense of uselessness and lack of purpose, which appeared to bother Edna as she felt she could and would like to contribute.

“Well yeah I, I think some of it comes from societies expectations, you know. I know I've worked my whole life to the point where now, I could retire, and you know receive a pension but it's like...but I still feel like I could do stuff and be useful in some way.”

It seemed that the ideological belief that being a working citizen translates to worth and value in society was embodied by Edna.⁸⁹ She was vulnerable and brave in sharing how it felt being a senior woman, associating purpose with employment.

“As a senior, I don't know if I've come across some more seniors who...who are- kind of struggle with the same mental talk that goes through my head. I hope not, really. My minds kind of negative. I kind of feel useless, now that I don't work and contribute to society in... some way. I

just don't feel like I have a purpose. So that feels kind of, that's kind of a downer, kind of a depressing thing. Not to feel like I have a purpose, and I'm just taking up space."

The challenges of retirement, which can disrupt routines and rituals and elicit a sense of loss^{47,88} seemed to deeply affect Edna. Throughout her adult life, Edna primarily based her decisions on ensuring she could take care of herself and not be a bother to others. Edna's quote suggests how individuals internalize ageist beliefs, impacting one's dignity and sense of purpose.^{42,45} While Edna felt she may be alone in the struggle with the negative thoughts she feels toward herself, the feeling of "taking up space" is not uncommon for aging adults who often feel in the way or burdensome.^{15,45} In contrast to how Edna felt about her status as a retired senior, she later described the good feeling she has being in the presence of Hope Blooms, and the network that has been created through the executive director's vision.

"I like being under the influence of people that want to do positive good work...at least to be in their presence, you know, and I have a good feeling being in the presence of Hope Blooms. The ED has the spirit and she has brought it this far, and she has brought in people...she knows how to invite people in to help, and to know how to do those things to the point where she's created what she has, this...which you know, giving opportunities to students, like yourself, and other people who in turn... then the students are also adding their expertise and their knowledge, you know your knowledge and helping the place become what it is. Just a, a positive atmosphere of helping the community, to the point where, well the community can get bigger and bigger."

Edna's statement of the collaborative nature of HB is reminiscent of the concept of social capital, which is the shared norms, values, and trust within a community.²¹ Hope Blooms' capacity to

extend relationships and create a network of people seemed to strengthen and expand the social capital within the community and increase support and access to learning opportunities for individuals involved.

Linking back to the theoretical framework, it is evident how the setting of HB interacts with the women's larger community and their contributing roles. Being at Hope Blooms where social entrepreneurship is a key part of their organization encouraged and built the women's capacity to contribute to their community within the North End of Halifax. Shayla talked about how they brainstormed their own social enterprise, making afro-centric greeting cards.

“We now are thinking about doing the um, the cards thing so, I think that's going to be pretty good for us...not going to be that hard to do. So, we're doing ethnic Christmas cards, which is something that um, is kind of hard really to get here in Halifax, so we thought about that you know... and all proceeds that we get from that go back into the community. And were going to target on, maybe like um, you know like um, the men's shelter, women's shelter...just like things like needed things like face cloths, toothpaste, and that kind of stuff you know, to help out.”

Making and selling Afrocentric greeting cards allowed the women to engage with the African Nova Scotian community in the North End and contribute to other community outreach groups in a way that was both feasible and socially innovative. The cards the women were making was not only a way to participate in their community, it was a sign of social entrepreneurship and activism where an intentional action was taken to bring change. As stated by Shayla, ethnic Christmas cards are not easy to find, and therefore the women chose to address an issue around cultural and racial diversity and representation through a simple act of making greeting cards.

Engaging in meaningful activities such as this, can enable the feeling of playing a role in their own lives, enhance quality of life and positive perspectives on aging.^{23,45,65} It is interesting to think about the women's card businesses in relation to past research that explored how women embrace their identity through the avenue of community participation. More specifically, women's identity that is formed at the intersections of race, gender and age overlap with how they choose to engage in their communities.⁶⁵ It is powerful that these women, who identify as seniors, from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, economic class, and religion come together to honour these identities, and create social change by addressing a larger societal issue and giving back to other community groups in need.

Within the context of aging and identity as a senior, Shayla acknowledged some of the barriers EWB initially faced when they started at Hope Blooms which began as a community garden.

“She (the ED) suggested that, why don't we have a little group and meet. Um, maybe find something to do, so we did. So... and when we first started out with Empowered Women Blossom, that's when we (laughs), we were first going to do... um, we were going to go in the garden and work, but that didn't work too well because of our ages.”

As an aging adult, coping with barriers and challenges by focusing on things one can do rather than what one cannot do is an important approach to preserve one's self-worth,⁴⁵ which was evident in Shayla's statement. Shayla spoke to the significance of their moniker within the context of being a senior in the community, while highlighting the aloneness is experienced by many seniors.

“...I know myself I can speak for myself to say that part of our logo is that if hope can bloom, you know, us, us as senior citizens we can blossom. I mean there’s still things that we can do, like we are seniors but, we can still do something to give back to the community. And even in saying that, us as seniors, it’s just nice that we have places we can go because most of us are seniors that live alone, with the exception of maybe one or two. So, it gives us something to look forward to, really.”

It seemed that Shayla both reconciled with and resisted the challenges that coincide with being a senior such as physiological changes which impact mobility.¹² Her phrase “like we are seniors but, we can still...” is an underpinning to how stereotypical and homogenous views of seniors are pervasive and reinforce how individuals and society negatively talk about age.^{16,24,47} Yet for these women, ageist ideals rendering seniors as inconsequential⁴⁷ did not necessarily reflect their participation in their community or their perceptions of themselves. As the women talked about their community within Uniacke Square, within Hope Blooms, and within the North End of Halifax it became clear that they worked to create relationships and foster places of support,²⁴ which may have been an outcome of the ethos of Hope Blooms. While Shayla spoke about continuing to stay socially active regardless of age, at the same time she mentioned the reality of being a senior who lives alone, where places to go are limited. It was meaningful to have a social place like HB that lone women could depend on that simultaneously built women’s capacity for community participation. This seemed to create space for women to embrace as well as cultivate their identity as seniors. The symbiotic relationship of Hope Blooms and the Empowered Women Blossom perhaps speaks to the need to change the narrative of seniors and senior women being inconsequential and consider the importance of having spaces where aging adults are empowered to stay involved in community in ways that are desirable to them and reflect their

identities.^{23,24} Similar to Shayla, Betty also talked about the lack of senior-specific places and things to do, mentioning that HB fills a void and provides opportunity for participation in unique and diverse opportunities.

“We've made small community projects, we've had dinners, we've had things, otherwise- what else would we be doing? There's nothing really for seniors, unless it's to go to another health and wellness session, or that type of thing.”

Betty gave an example from her experience of an EWB session facilitated by an agricultural scientist who is a consultant for medicinal organic cannabis production. While she shared some funny stories that came out of the session, she felt it was beneficial for the women who experience some age-related health complications.

“But it was informative you know what I mean, and I know a couple of the women...have tried it since then and have...and are able to sleep, and stuff like that, you know what I mean, and different things you know with arthritis and bursitis? is it bursitis in your leg? Yeah, stuff like that.”

The day Betty spoke up was an entertaining day that was full of laughs as well as a bonding experience for the women. Additionally, the session seemed to be valuable to Betty as the women had a trustworthy space to talk about something that could be considered taboo. Betty appreciated having someone bring in information that they may not otherwise have access to.

“It was really helpful because there’s no one out there who comes to seniors to tell about this. Or to say, you can get it in an oil, most of them want it in an oil because they don’t smoke or anything, but the benefits of it right and stuff like that, but that was a safe place to talk.”

“It was informative, and I don’t think those other women would have made their way to the government store to inquire had they not first heard it at Hope Blooms...”

Having access to educational sessions appeared to be important to Betty as she talked about how seniors may be excluded from novel information. Betty’s example of the effectiveness of the medicinal cannabis session in helping women with age-related health complications such as insomnia and pain speaks to the importance of continual learning to keep seniors connected to the world around them with opportunities to participate.²⁴ The women demonstrated fearlessness in learning new perspectives and ideas to integrate into their lives which can be a result of learning from younger people.^{24,85} This example also prompted curiosity of aging adults’ expectations and needs around access to learning new information, and how this may be part of the conversation to create age-friendly communities.¹⁸ For Betty, who felt there is lack of outreach to seniors, there seems to be some anticipation of having individuals come to them. Hope Blooms, which has built connections locally, provincially, and nationally serves as an access point or hub for information.

5.5.2. Preserving the true meaning of community: “...it’s not just a word, it’s people coming together...celebrating, not celebrating...you know, something that’s happening. You need community.”

This particular group of women seemed to strongly value community and were aware of the changes happening before them. The idea of social capital reflected their experiences in their own neighbourhood and informed what community meant to the women. The generosity and care for their community may have stemmed from the gendered role of caretaking that women often undertake.⁶⁵ Community participation was especially important to a couple participants who felt there are not too many close-knit communities left. Betty expressed that people may not truly understand how important community is and its significance beyond being a place to live.

“I fear that communities are going to be dying out and people don’t understand how important community is, you know what I mean, it’s not just a word, it’s people coming together...celebrating, not celebrating...you know, something that’s happening. You need community.”

Concern of disrupted social ties and neighbourhood connectedness seemed to be felt by Betty as she described community in a more traditional sense, framing the idea of home not as a place where one invests their money but a place where “one has established roots and connections and where births, deaths, friendships, disputes, and goings and comings of the generations”^{90(p. 15)} Betty expressed a deep understanding and appreciation of communities and how they benefit residents.

“I mean, gathering places were always- they're always a good thing, you know what I mean. Whether you're gathering for a community meal anywhere, or whether you're gathering to sit down and chat and learn about healthy food, sustainability, that type of things. It’s an enrichment.”

It seemed that Betty attributed meaning to shared experiences such as communal meals or learning. The importance of preserving a sense of community within one's neighbourhood can be further understood with the idea that seniors often spend more time in their homes and in their neighbourhoods in comparison to younger age groups.⁶⁴ Friends, family and neighbours within one's locality also make up the network of informal support those for those who community dwelling seniors who intend to age in place and stay in their homes for the remainder of their lives.^{52,53} Shayla talked about the informal support network in her neighbourhood, where being acquainted her neighbours meant being supported in times of need.

“It's like, it's really a community. You know like, there's not too many communities left...here. You know like, I mean like, where I live, even where I live right here in Uniacke square, I may not know all the people that live here but, I know them by their face, or they know me. Everybody speaks, everybody like gets along it's like, you know...and you might think no one don't care, but the minute you're in trouble, you need something, they're right at your door, they're there you know...that's community. So, I mean like, there's people I know that live outside of here and I've been to visit them and things like and they don't even know who their next-door neighbour is, you know.”

Feeling cared for in times of need was something Shayla ascribed to the meaning of community. There was as a sense of pride and gratitude as she talked about where she lives, recognizing the support she feels from her neighbours that may not occur in other city neighbourhoods that are not as close-knit. It is important to consider the history of North End Halifax and Uniacke square, whose residents such as Shayla have maintained community roots and sense of belonging

through decades of stigmatization and structural changes in which long-term residents were excluded.⁶¹ Between 1958 and 1963, the City of Halifax cleared several blocks of affordable housing to develop the area as part of their urban renewal plan to make it more aesthetically pleasing and safe.⁶¹ City planners however did not consider the welfare of the residents, consequently causing displacement.⁹¹ Houses were demolished, office towers were built, and whole communities such as Africville were destroyed to make space for a highway to lead to the new commercial areas.⁶¹ The Gottingen street area which has been home to many racialized people has been negatively perceived and historically underserved, with sensationalized focus on crime and poverty.⁶¹

The way Shayla and Betty talked about their community can be considered through Nettles paper, which explores elder women's engagement with community, and the meaning of place.²³ While Nettles specifically looked at the experiences of women of colour, which does not reflect all the women of EWB, Nettles articulated how elderly women may take action and preserve the future of meaningful places, which is stimulated by changing events such as development, demolition or neglect.²³ An important sense of security and sense of belonging stems from the positive experiences attached to being in places women have occupied for generations.²³ Building community resilience through strong social connections is critical to overcome adversity, and shared meanings attached to places are important for sense of belonging, security and comfort.²³

Shayla talked about having HB as a place in the community to gather with EWB and the benefit it served for those who live alone. She was transparent about circumstances many seniors are facing.

“I’m talking about seniors that mostly live alone like I said, the most thing I think that they have...it would be loneliness, it would be you know, just to have some place to go to socialize. Some people don’t have that at all. Some people never leave the inside of their apartments, never leave their places. So, you know, just to get out. That’s the great thing right there. And, and then truthfully, it’s a lot more to do than you think, I mean like, you know when we go there, we never know what we’re going to do, really, so...it’s a good outlet.”

Shayla seemed to advocate for seniors in the way she talked about the reality of loneliness and social isolation. Over time, communities change and with those changes comes a shift in shared values and social ties as described by Betty and Shayla.^{59,63} Such changes intersected with the dynamic experience of aging, where individuals are challenged to adjust to their changing environment.²⁵ The sense of community these women were used to and felt was being lost outlines how seniors whom are already vulnerable to social isolation may be increasingly impacted.⁵⁹ Shayla anticipated potential opportunities for seniors in the community as she expressed her excitement of the new space that Hope Blooms is building.

Oh, I think it’s going to be so exciting. It’s going to be so much better when we change into a new space. Oh, there's just so much things we'll be able to do that we couldn't do in the older space. Like you know, like we can maybe add some new programs for seniors, like you know something, as opposed to just what we’re doing now, you know. Yeah, there’s all kind of ideas

that women are thinking about things that, that can be done. And the space is... going to be so beautiful, yeah”

Awareness of changes happening within the community came up for Betty who talked about the recent development that has in some ways been problematic for marginalized groups. New condominium buildings on Gottingen Street, storefronts that house boutique shops, restaurants and drinking establishments, as well as renovated houses to use for short term rental such as Airbnb are a few of the changes occurring in the area. One of the problems is many new businesses do not have a relationship with the community.⁶¹ Conversely, Betty also felt some of the new establishments are not entirely negative.

“I'm not directly in that area but I kind of understand it. And um, like, seniors and low-income families are swept by the way side and these new buildings are going in and II think it's, I don't know I'm taking a step forward here but I don't think it's a bad thing [the new buildings]. I think sometimes people don't like change and it's a bit of moving forward and um, the shops that they have there are always accommodating so...you know. I like the idea of every building that went up had to have um, a store or places for stores and stuff, like that doesn't mean...that makes it better, right. And um, I wish they had put money, more money into the housing that they do have there for the seniors, you know what I mean.”

Similar to Shayla, Betty's value of community and regard for those who are undervalued or underserved seemed to stimulate ideas for Hope Blooms to continue to be a place that bring people together and help others. While talking about barriers to food access, the potential for pop-up markets had occurred to Betty as a way to increase food access within the community

and support smaller food producers such as those who have immigrated to Canada. Betty talked about this as a possibility within the new Hope Blooms building.

“Because the smaller people at the markets got pushed out, the smaller farmers and stuff, you'll see from the different markets, they always get pushed out, and um, well where do they go? But if it's going to be feasible for them to come up like one or two days a week and sell all their wares, because they're much cheaper than what you're paying at the market at some, it would be a good thing.

As the women shared ideas of what could happen in the new building, the sense of belonging and inclusion women had previously described with HB seemed to also create a sense of empowerment and ownership to contribute to future endeavours. The women appeared to have a keen awareness of social capital within their community and demonstrated leadership as they talked about opportunities for change. The women's knowledge of, and appreciation for their neighbourhood provided insight to the importance of engaging seniors in conversations regarding the development and changes happening around them. New shops, restaurants and residences are often catered to the younger demographic, and as mentioned by Betty, seniors are not often prioritized.⁵⁹ These changes have stimulated conversations around the social and political problems that are inherent to gentrification.^{61,63} Maude says she likes this area but it “is not home” for her, as she spent her earlier adult life and childhood in the countryside. Maude talked about her perceptions of the conversations she had been hearing.

“...and now, they're changing the place up right, making it looking better. Making the place, making the streets look better, instead of shabby. You know what I mean? I don't mind. Some

people don't like it. Yeah, some people don't like it, they think "fixing it up, they're just fixing it up for white people" and all kind of stupid talk, I think it's stupid talk.... Because everyone is here on the streets, so why would you do it just for white people? You don't know who is going to live in them buildings, or who ain't going to live in them buildings.

Maude described this "stupid talk" as people being prejudice which meant something to her as she grew frustrated talking about it. Maude's perspective of the prejudice nature of conversations around race are informed by personal experiences, and hearing conversations about the neighbourhood centred around racial inequity, prompted her to talk about specific experiences in her life where she was treated differently because of the darkness of her skin. Maude's statement of the tension within community reflects many problematic aspects of community development and gentrification where the voices of long-term residents are not centred to lead these changes. Lack of unity and participatory approaches to engage community members across gender, age, ethnicity, culture, education, are neglected, exacerbating social inequity and division between residents.⁶⁸

5.6. Food, health and aging: *"We are seniors and so we want to take care of ourselves and our health."*

The women talked about various aspects of their engagement with food including perceptions of their diet, knowledge around food in relation to health, and the experience of preparing food. The spheres of influence were presented in unique ways; women's immediate environments such as home and HB, health information and access to food, and greater societal beliefs around eating healthy. These factors interconnected to shape women's food practices, while intersecting with the experience of age to create changes over time. It seemed that having a place to gather for lunch,

share stories, and learn about nutrition was also a way for women to address their well-being and navigate through the physiological and psychological changes.

Each participant talked about their individual experiences, yet many of the women were not alone in the challenges that impact their experiences around food. The association of health risks with food choice, also known as dietary food risks³³ was seemingly influential in how women thought about food and perceived their diets. Messages around health and nutrition from media, public health, or popular nutrition were mentioned and dichotomizing terms such as healthy, unhealthy, good, bad were used when women talked about their engagement with food. The nutrition education sessions with Empowered Women Blossom appeared to lead to a sense of empowerment as well as concern or uncertainty of what to eat or how to cook. While some women felt more knowledgeable or aware of “healthy eating”, the experience of living and eating alone presented challenges that impact diet. The multiple facets of participants food choices and experiences did not work alone, however they emerged as three separate sections; 1) new experiences and navigating physical food environment, 2) influence of nutritionism and uncertainty of what to eat and 3) experiences around being alone were discussed.

5.6.1 Eating together and learning together: *“We'll try anything, you know what I mean? and its new experiences and new way of looking at things and eating things.”*

The women talked about how sharing meals and engaging in conversations related to food and nutrition with fellow EWB members played a role in their lives outside of Hope Blooms. A sense

of empowerment and enjoyment was detected as some women mentioned what they had learned and how it was incorporated into their routine at home. Betty highlighted a day when they learned from a student/dietitian from Israel who prepared and talked about Israeli foods with the EWB group.

“It’s really opened our eyes, because we've had a lot of different foods, we had an Israeli lady come in and prepare, what we would look at as breakfast, but I guess it is their main meal. And it was like, really tasty. You know sometimes when you look at pictures of foods, or you say "would you like some of this " you go "no", but I find in the group, we'll try anything, you know what I mean? and its new experiences and new way of looking at things and eating things.”

For Betty, having lunch with EWB was an opportunity to be adventurous and try new foods. Betty talked about the women’s openness and interest in learning about different ways to cook, and the experience of having dietetic interns within Hope Blooms.

“We learned a lot through having intern dietitians. Where to pair food, and that it’s not that hard to make a frittata, it’s not that hard to you know, pair meals that have different vegetables and different spices that bring it to life rather than you know, your meat and potatoes day.”

Betty’s statement uncovered how the relationships Hope Blooms has with Universities, specifically the nutrition faculty, created an avenue for EWB to connect with students and share knowledge. Incorporating new, feasible ideas into one’s routine seemed to be valuable to Betty who perhaps wanted to stray from meat and potatoes. For women who may have primarily cooked family sized, classic meals, learning new recipes or cooking techniques can enhance

confidence and excitement about food.⁹² It was interesting to hear changing perspectives from those who had spent a lot time cooking for their families. Betty and Shayla highlighted how new learnings around cooking were not as challenging as they had anticipated. Shayla, who had always been the main cook for her family, felt that her cooking was not always geared around “healthy eating”. She talked about her shift in perception of both taste and ease around preparing healthy food.

I don't know, I just um... I don't think I really took to heart how good healthy eating can be, you know what I mean? You hear it, you think you don't have time, but a lot of the prep... a lot of the food we've eaten down there (Hope Blooms), it takes- it don't take no time, so you know, you learn that too.”

Surprise as well as content was detected as Shayla talked about her change in perception of healthy eating. Shayla's statement also calls into question how individuals' perceptions or ideas around health are shaped, and how the popularized discourse around healthy eating is overly technical and not inclusive.³³ Marketing of specific diets and foods for their health producing properties often sidesteps the social and political dimensions of food environments.³³ Discourse around healthy eating has predominantly been constructed through a Eurocentric lens, disregarding the cultural relevance and social significance food that is woven into individual, family and community together.³³ The achievement of health through diet is often communicated as personal responsibility and available choice, while undermining the structural limitations social inequality has on food choice.^{33,93} Shayla talked about the cost of food being a barrier to healthy eating.

“I used to say to my dietitian that to eat healthy, the realization of that is, when you're on a fixed income, it is not as easy to do. You know, you can say it but it's not as easy to do because it's one of those things where everything good for you and healthy for you is the most expensive things. You know so, that's why I think a lot of people don't eat healthy.”

Many seniors can relate to being on a low fixed income, where a specific amount of money is provided from the government on a monthly basis. Income directly impacts food access, and the way food practices can be performed²⁰; a challenge many seniors have to negotiate. In 2013, 28.2% of lone senior women lived on a low-income in Canada.¹ In Nova Scotia, lone senior women experience disproportionately higher rates of food insecurity, as do Black and other racialized individuals'.^{1,20,57} While learning new skills and information around nutrition and cooking is positive, there are limitations as power and social inequity within gender, race and class directly impacts food access.^{40,57,94}

Betty further highlighted the inflated cost of produce, and the implications to buy quantities of food appropriate for one person. Storage, waste, as well as access were concerns that were compounded with that fact that you need less food as you get older and the experience of being in a grocery store becomes unappealing. In terms of safety, Betty avoids going at night, and that winter is “the worst”.

“Produce is very expensive in the stores and storing it or keeping it for a long period of time like, you don't want to be going... the grocery stores aren't that close that you can walk to them every day. I don't have a car, majority of us don't drive so, you know.”

Betty's statement illustrated the experience of navigating one's food environment combined with challenges inherent to aging. With consideration of building age-friendly communities, going grocery shopping at night and in the winter as a senior woman becomes less enjoyable as experienced by Betty. The women's statements were a reminder of how forces at the exosystem level such as government pension, transportation, and infrastructure actively play a role in the women's engagement with food.²⁰ Furthermore, the way in which communities are organized and structured to include or neglect essential services to meet the needs of their community members is imperative to food choice on an individual and community level.^{20,33} For example, a Sobeys' supermarket on Gottingen Street closed in 1980's after running for twenty years.⁶¹ The closure was an outcome of municipal politicians' choices to commercialize other areas of Halifax and develop new roadways which reduced the commercialisation of Gottingen street.⁶¹ Decreased access to affordable, nutritious food, also known as a food desert, was a consequent and unfortunate outcome that accurately represents the social inequity within food systems.³³ Food apartheid has also been presented as a new term for food deserts, as the term desert represents desolation and emptiness. Food apartheid on the other hand, centres the social injustices of food systems that result in certain neighbourhoods having lower access to healthy food.⁹⁴

In addition to the cost and accessibility of food, the experience of navigating one's food choices was articulated by Shayla who has made changes for herself and her health.

“Well over the years it has. That's a very hard thing you know um, the changing of food. And I mean, myself being a diabetic now, I'm supposed to be eating healthy anyway. But...I have learned a lot about eating healthy, I, I do eat healthier than I ever did, truthfully with the um, you

know the vegetables, and certain things I know I'm not supposed to have, that's not everything, but I mean, I do see the difference, I really do yeah, it makes a big difference.”

While Shayla described the changing of food over the years as hard, shifting toward some healthier eating practices to manage her diabetes is reflective of dietary resilience, where one can change their diet despite challenges.²⁹ Shayla's experience further uncovers the complexity of food, and how chronic disease such as diabetes adds another layer of personal responsibility to take care of oneself through eating healthy.⁷⁸ Reflecting on Shayla's statement prompted consideration of both the challenges and opportunities for nutrition education and the role community organizations. Hope Blooms has worked to address food insecurity within the community, and ensure community members have access fresh, affordable food community by implementing and running a community garden, hosting community meals, and creating connections with long term residents and families.

In addition to providing a meal and conversation, lunch at HB was a time when the women didn't have to think about what they should prepare. In the beginning of each interview, women talked about their favourite meals at Hope Blooms. For a few participants, they mentioned enjoying fresh, homemade foods. For some women it was family style meals like Turkey dinner, that brought everyone together and “took the ease off of preparing your own”. Edna eluded to how a simple meal like soup and bread can be memorable.

“I remember a while ago coming the short distance to Hope Blooms and being chilly. A warm bowl of soup with bread and butter hit the spot like I never really felt before. “

Bringing women together to enjoy easy to prepare meals and share knowledge demonstrated the power of food as a vehicle for personal and community change.⁸³ Reflecting upon Hope Blooms effort and advocacy for food justice can also be considered within the context of the Empowered Women Blossom gatherings. A positive outcome of incorporating nutrition education may be development of individuals' sense of agency versus responsibility to manage certain challenging and changing aspects of one's personal health as well as the food environment. The importance of nutrition to maintain health and chronic disease, and the role of dietitians in community settings such as Hope Blooms is seemingly valuable.

“And we, we learned different things about vitamins and how to read labels, and what labels mean. Um, and of course our famous glucose, we learn over and over. And our salt intake, which you know, keeps you in line sometimes, or it makes your aware, especially because we are seniors and so we want to take care of ourselves and our health and a lot of the ladies are diabetic, so it helps them- the recipes, especially the soups and the small items they can make and pre-prepare.”

The women's status as seniors, and changes to their health seemed to influence the value Betty placed on nutrition education sessions. While her statement suggested that these women value and care about their health, her statement “especially because we are seniors, so we want to take care of ourselves...” served as a reminder of the upheld stereotype that aging is a process of deteriorating health and other complications in which the senior person is responsible.⁴⁷ The discourse around healthy aging has communicated the importance of practicing healthy behaviours and discipline in order to do remain independent and age well.⁴⁷ Being aware of how implications of ageist and discriminatory beliefs that health care services are disproportionately

utilized by seniors may broaden the understanding of how seniors perceive and undertake their health.⁴⁷

Another participant, Rose, felt the educational portion and resources provided which she kept at home were important. Although Betty talked about how the nutrition-related lessons helped, her mention of learning about glucose over and over, and her choice of words that it is good to be “kept in line” reveals the implications of pervasive nutrition messages. Does perpetually learning about the negative impacts of specific nutrients in isolation from food to the constant feeling of needing to self-monitor and control one’s intake?

5.6.2 Navigating nutrition information: “*I’m really struggling because I don’t know what I should be eating.*”

The influence of nutritionism, or the ideologies around nutrition which medicalize and deconstruct foods based on their nutritional function³³ was notable in how women talked about their diets. Navigating ones changing health, the food system and messaging around what is healthy or nutritious appeared to be challenging and caused some uncertainty or precaution around what women felt they should be eating. As the women shared their concerns and stories, the meaning of food for these women became more complex. The above quote was stated within the context of weight loss and mirrors how the picture of health is often partially, and falsely constructed around weight.³³ The pressure to eat healthy was compounded by physiological changes that are natural outcomes of aging, such as slowed metabolism and change in blood pressure.⁹⁵

The different ways that women talked about health and perceived their diet indicated the individual variance of the meanings people hold about their health. For Maude, whose granddaughter took on most of the cooking upon moving in, food related recommendations and messages both she and her husband had heard influenced her ideas about cooking. She laughed as she mentioned she has never enjoyed cooking, and only did it out of necessity.

“Like some people love cooking, but me I’m not a cooker...but you got to cook to eat, so. And then I don’t know what, what to uh, how to flavour, what to flavour. Like, just salt and pepper? You don’t take salt...that’s what they say, don’t take salt because you got high blood pressure... that’s what my husband says, you got high blood pressure, so you’re not supposed to take salt.”

Deciding what meals to prepare for her and her husband seemed to be a frustrating experience as she had heard food items they enjoyed were “not good for you”. Maude’s statement around minimizing salt intake to manage blood pressure because that’s what “they” say, illuminated the power and internalization of the ever-present lay and public health messaging,³³ some of which is generalized to the senior population. Although there were uncertainties around some items such as salt, Maude’s sense of humour and ease about the subject seemed to be a way to cope as she laughed and said, “it’s not going to kill ya”. As Maude continued to talk about cooking it was apparent that in addition to health recommendations, her husband’s preferences and health were also prioritized.

“My husband's talking about casserole, I like casseroles too! But how can I figure out what to put in it and make a nice casserole?... And I said, “we can’t eat meat every day, you can’t eat meat every day, it’s not good for you to eat meat every day.”

The way Maude talked about her views on cooking provided insight to the various factors that women consider even into their later years. Providing a “nice” meal, that is palatable, healthy, and appeals to family members are a few factors that go into meal ⁶ and in Maude’s case, partially deterred her interest in cooking.

Additional stressors and concerns of the influence of age with diet, such as slowing metabolism was mentioned by Rose. While talking about her engagement with food, Rose felt she was more aware of what she eats than ever before, with increasing attention paid to salt and sugar content. In comparison to Maude’s narrative that salt is “not going to kill ya”, Rose seemed more apprehensive. The way in which Rose talked about awareness of food prompted question of the potential negative implications to learning.

Moderator: And do you feel that has maintained your love for food or is there any sort of fear that’s come with learning?

“Fear, yes. Um (pause) I pull back (pause) because I live alone now. I’m trying to, like I always didn’t remove the skin off the chicken and all that but, sauces...I always use sauces when I cook, not all the time but a lot of the time. And....now, I’m telling my son, he’s away but as we talk about food and everything and I’m saying, “do you know much sugar ketchup has in it?” and bla bla bla. So, I’m more aware but I’m also hesitant when I’m eating...um, because I would like to be able to lose weight, but I’m struggling. I’m really struggling because I don’t know what I should be eating.”

Although learning new information contributed to changing awareness around food, it seemed that living alone and feeling the need to lose weight also influenced Rose. Heightened awareness of her body increased feeling responsible to achieve health through food,³³ consequently causing some hesitation. It seemed that when Rose was cooking for her family, she didn't think about chicken skin or the sugar content of ketchup. Rose's experience exemplified how different stages of life shift women's focus on food, where perhaps preoccupation with nutrient content may differ when cooking for and sitting around the table with family then when eating alone. Rose's experience also served as important feedback to what may be prioritized within nutrition education for women throughout the life course. Effort could be directed to critically questioning widespread, fear-inducing nutrition messages and mitigate confusion around health, diet and weight.^{33,93,96} Continuous changes within the food system which market health by following trends and commodify foods based on health recommendations^{79,96} seemed to influence how some women engage with food. The enjoyment of food can be interfered with as certain foods are promoted for their functional benefit to achieve nutritional health.⁷⁹ For Rose Conflicting nutrition messages added to her uncertainty of what to eat at times.

“...I'm more conscious. One thing I didn't know, I feel silly saying this that you know um, um...I think it was carbs, be careful how much carbs you're eating... but people are always talking about cereal and how healthy cereal can be for you. Almost all cereals, like even I eat brand buds with yoghurt, even that, it's all like... it's all processed.”

Rose's statement about carbohydrates was reflective of how philosophies around healthy eating, such as nutritionism, that medicalize food and prioritize nutrient content over the food itself can result in self-surveillance as individuals purchase, prepare and eat their meals, and remove

traditional meanings of food.⁷⁹ While there is an abundance of evidence-based research on the nutritional benefit of consuming carbohydrates that are whole, unrefined or low on the glycemic index, the moral virtue associated with low-carb or “whole”, unprocessed diets can lead to shame or inadequacy for not those who veer from these dietary patterns,⁹⁶ and in this case led to Rose feeling confused and even silly. Again, it is important to consider how the trends around healthy eating, for example low carbohydrate, which often centralizes thin, young bodies as a picture of health can be oppressive and even capitalize off of individuals.⁹⁶ Despite spending many years taking care of and feedings oneself and their family, it seemed that senior women are not immune to the persuasiveness of healthy eating discourse. It is likely that Rose was not raised with fear or concern around carbohydrate intake yet is challenged by and confused with conflicting information to be careful of how much carbohydrates she consumes.

Participants seemed to hold some judgement toward themselves as they talked about their diet. Statements such as “I don’t eat enough vegetables” were mentioned by Edna who described her perceived lack of structure around her eating habits.

“Yeah, it’s kind of...unplanned you know, like I don’t have...I don’t have discipline. Everything is sporadic. I eat better when other people cook, (long pause) yeah, I don’t get up and eat breakfast...but then Doctor Oz had on his show that it’s not necessary to have to eat now before eleven”

Edna perceived her lack of routine and not eating breakfast as negative, and it seemed approval from an outside media source, in this case Dr. Oz, allowed her to feel okay about certain behaviours. Edna provided a unique perspective as a woman who has lived alone for most of her

adult life. She was seemingly hard on herself as she described her eating habits, mentioning how she tried diets on and off and prepared basic meals or tv dinners. Edna often intended to prepare a meal, but it didn't always go as planned.

“Well, I have a tendency to buy vegetables and then they sit there and rot in the fridge. So, I get frozen as much as possible (pause) the way I eat these days, is not a very good thing. You know, not a good example for (long pause) you know it's kind of like go to the fridge and (long pause) I don't know how to explain my poor habits. I think (pause) I guess a good word is lazy. Once in a while like, for example, you know I threw some chicken legs in the toaster oven to bake and then... you know, I'll just eat a chicken wing. I won't put it together with...you know, my head is saying okay I'll do up some rice...but then, I don't. I'll just chew on a chicken leg, that'll take care of that part and feel like okay, you ate something good now you can eat chips and ice cream. And that's basically...that's basically how that goes.”

The overarching theme of being alone was a common thread through many interviews as the women talked about their engagement with food. The experience of preparing food carried stress for some women who pulled back from certain foods, felt the need to eat healthier, or perceived their eating habits as poor. The uncertainty of what to eat and barriers to prepare meals when alone was interesting to hear from women who had cooked for their families most of their lives. It became apparent how changes to one's immediate environments over time, such as your children leaving home, significantly impacted women's engagement and enthusiasm around food.⁴

5.6.3. The impact of being alone: “Yeah you know when you live alone you don’t want to cook...anything”

While some of the women felt more knowledgeable or skillful about food and nutrition; being alone, not having someone to cook for, and not having the energy or interest in preparing a meal seemed to be prevailing factors in how women engaged with food. As previously discussed in section 5.6.2, some women who lived alone were hard on themselves and talked about their eating habits and routine as unhealthy or bad. Conversely, meals shared with EWB were described as “the healthiest” or “the only healthy meal”, which caused further curiosity of what the women’s ideals of a healthy meal are. In contrast to eating at home alone, eating with others appeared to hold meaning for how the women associated health with diet.

Straying from certain eating patterns such as sitting down for three meals came up for some women. The challenges of living alone and cooking for oneself was mentioned by Betty who talked about change in structure of meals and mealtimes.

“Yeah, you have, you have to learn to cook less, and sometimes it encourages you to prepare two meals out of that one meal that your making, so that if something already made and you only have to make a side, it’s a lot easier. And um, it keeps you eating because you don’t eat healthy when you’re alone. You don’t eat breakfast, dinner and supper, you know what I mean. Most of the time you get in the bad habit of trying to cram it all in at night. Which is not healthy.”

Preparedness or the idea of being prepared when it came to meals seemed to be behaviours that the women felt were necessary or important but did not always achieve living alone. This concept of eating properly and feeling bad if one did not prepare three meals a day highlights the

influence of normalized dietary patterns and eating behaviours that occurred when eating with others in comparison to eating alone. There is added complexity as aging results in physiological, psychological and social changes impacting appetite and interest in food^{10,12,13} which makes these normalized eating patterns less feasible. Edna also talked about her uncertainty of what other people her age were doing, and the option of Souls Harbour, a drop-in centre in the community that provides free, daily meals for the underserved.

“I just notice more and more how less and less I'm preparing meals for myself...and, I can only chalk it up to laziness. Not caring about myself. I don't really connect much with other people my age to know what they're doing. I think in my building a lot of them go to Souls Harbour...they get to a point I guess they don't want to cook for themselves. I'm getting to a point where I'm thinking, I'll go there. I'll probably at least get a better meal than what I'm doing for myself.”

The appeal of eating meals with others rather than eating alone was present for Edna, who talked about preparing food less and less. A decrease in food preparation was attributed to something much deeper for Edna as she connected it back to her feelings about herself. Edna did not associate her lack of care with her age in the above quote, however thinking back to section 2.0 (experience as a senior in community) where Edna described feeling a sense of uselessness now that she is older and retired provides context of where these feelings may come from. Similarly, Rose talked about not preparing meals when she is alone and provided insight to some of her food habits.

“When I go through Empowered Women Blossom, it's the one time I eat really something healthy. Because being by myself I'm not always prepping healthy foods. I eat, I eat vegetables, I

eat...I eat fruit, but I'm not always cooking them and sitting down with a meal, you know. So, if I have people in my home, I know I'm going to eat a meal. Like I, I might have a plate with some crackers and stuff on it, I might have a plate with some carrots and celery on it but that's not a meal, that's a snack. And that's what happens to me a lot of the time during the day."

Lack of care when only cooking for oneself was also detected as Rose shared the certainty of sitting down to eat a meal if someone was in her home, but not if she was alone. Rose's description of the meal with EWB as the one time she eats healthy, strengthens the idea of eating with others of meals as a contributor to how "healthy" is constructed.²⁷ There seemed to be some dissatisfaction in how Rose felt about her lack of food preparation and snacking. Rose talked about missing the hustle and bustle in her home, and how she cooks less now that her "family has shrunk". Her story exemplified how no longer having an individual to cook for can disrupt food activities and food intake.^{13,19} Finding ways to invite people into her home and fulfill that space in her house where people used to come together was important to Rose.

"And my house was, a gathering house. So I'm thinking of who I can invite and what I'm going to have and keep remembering the foods that we do at Hope Blooms... and want to expose people to some of those foods, you know like sweet potato or um, I don't know about avocado but some of the other ones I want to try, some squash and stuff."

Eating alone represented something much deeper for Rose. The absence of people in her home to cook for also meant the absence of an enjoyable activity that symbolized people coming together and socializing in the kitchen.⁴ The value of sharing food and cooking for others was apparent as Rose would make some of the meals she had eaten at Hope Blooms, which would motivate her

to invite someone over to visit or to help her out and in turn she would feed them. She enjoyed seeing their reaction and whether they enjoyed the food as much as she did.

“I made the lentil soup, but when I make it, like I said whenever I do something, I have to invite people because you got too much soup there. So, I made lentil soup and they didn’t know they were eating lentil soup until after it was finished.”

In addition to embracing food as a way to bring people together, Rose shared what she had learned at HB with other women in her community and empowered them in doing so. She talked about a time when her niece and neighbour came over, and she showed them how to make granola bars.

“She has kids...so I um, I didn’t make it yet, but I showed her my ingredients, and then my niece came by and I was making it. I showed her the ingredients...so I was making it, and she says "oh, do you bake that?" and I said “no, just put it in the fridge”. So, I was telling her what the ingredients were, and she says, "I can make that, I’m sure I can’t make that" and I said “yeah, it’s not hard to make”. So, when it was made I sent Martha my neighbour to come over, and I gave her some to take to her kids, and they liked it, you know. I was like "yaaaay, this is what I learned at our group!" you know.”

There seemed to be a sense of pride and excitement as Rose talked about her time with her niece and neighbour. It also became clear that Rose is someone who creates connections and supports others in her community, using food as a way to connect. Rose’s belief in the power of cooking

bring people together was apparent as she talked about looking forward to the larger kitchen that would be in the new HB building.

“...maybe we'll be doing some of the cooking. I think we're going to be using that space for ourselves for cooking. Like you're always asking us "what do you guys want to do this week? what do you want to eat next week?" And I think the ladies will enjoy, like, when we did that meal one time...you brought us, we all had to get involved with cooking...we all had our own little dishes. You can see, you can see the joy...these are women used to cooking for their family.”

The role Rose played within her community and with EWB resonated with the notion that women choose to participate in their community and occupy roles in ways that represent their identities and preserves meaningful spaces.²³ Aspects of one's identity that are constructed through food related tasks and responsibilities may be challenged as fewer opportunities to occupy the role of the food provisioner are presented.²⁵ For Rose, the kitchen seemed to be a meaningful place, and living alone had impacted the regularity of activities that took place there. However, despite no longer have her children or husband at home, Rose continued to preserve this part of her identity by creating ways to share food with others. This narrative demonstrated resilience and how women overcome change in creative, inclusive ways and is attained by being part of and creating social spaces.²⁴ For some women like Rose, seeking opportunities to cook socially illustrated the joy of cooking when it is performed for and with others.

Alternatively, other women like Maude, have different feelings toward cooking and do not identify as a cook. She strongly stated her dislike for cooking, only doing it out of necessity because “you have to cook to eat”. Maude appreciated how her granddaughter who lived with

her had taken on the responsibilities of cooking. Being from the generation where women were traditionally the food provisioners,^{4,6} Maude's honest, unashamed statements of her aversion to cooking is a reminder that it is not an activity all women feel innately connected to. However, Maude seemed to connect to food in a different way, as she talked about memories of her as a child when her grandmother would prepare her breakfasts that she always looked forward to. She enjoyed having others prepare food for her and she laughed as she mentioned how she would eat at Hope Blooms every day if she could. Although Rose and Maude have contrasting values around cooking, there is opportunity to consider how this in fact creates a symbiotic relationship, where some women enjoy caring and cooking for others, and other women enjoy being cared for. The journey of aging also shifted how women chose to occupy their roles within the kitchen when other family members are around. Just as Maude appreciated having her granddaughter to cook, Shayla, who was always the main cook in her home, now enjoyed not having to do the cooking all time while feeling ambivalent about whether she missed it or not.

“Um, sometimes yes...sometimes no. Like um, I kind of now look forward to now, like on special occasions letting my daughters and them cook, I like to be the guest now (laughs)”

After years of cooking for others, Shayla enjoyed gathering with family and being the guest. For individuals who have family close by, such as Maude who lives with her granddaughter, or Shayla and her daughters, an informal support system where younger generations can care for the older is present. As indicated by Maude, eating at Hope Blooms was an enjoyable experience which meant different meals with different flavours she wasn't used to. Rose enjoyed sitting down for a meal with EWB as it symbolized connection, and a time when her family would

gather. Edna appreciated a healthy meal that she would not otherwise cook for herself, and to Betty it meant engaging in conversation with others.

5.7. Connecting back to Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory

The diagram below shows the spheres of influence which were integrated to help frame and understand the women’s experiences and capture the interrelated factors that surfaced from the women’s experiences. Although each sphere contains its own distinct outlines, they do not work in isolation. The participants interact within and between the spheres, assuming different roles and maintaining their various identities.

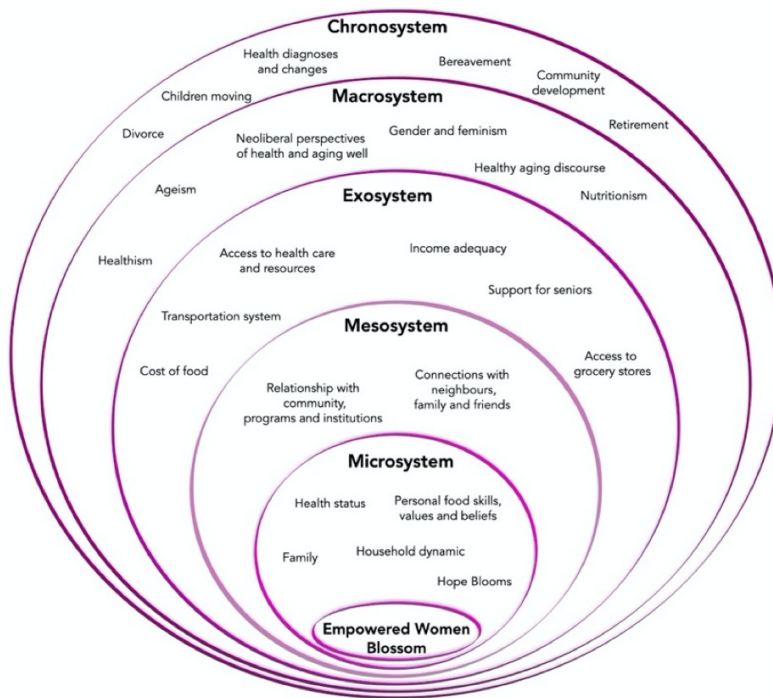


Figure 1.0 The spheres of influence according to Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological System Theory.

Microsystem

Within this research the women identified as seniors and members EWB, and occupied roles within HB related to this identity. Their perception of themselves as a senior was informed by the connections with the youth and staff of the organization. The social connection and social support as an outcome of gathering at Hope Blooms also intersected with the women's lives at home, where many of them lived alone. The reciprocal and respectful relationships formed at HB fostered a sense of value and trust as well as feeling needed and supported as senior women.

Changes to the participants households and health was reflected in women's engagement with food. Women's perspectives on preparing food for themselves was largely impacted by the changes that were an outcome of age, such as living alone and interest in food preparation. While the women valued food and associated nutrition with taking care of their health, factors in their immediate settings, especially living alone, diminished the role food played in their lives within their home environment. Conversely, gathering weekly with EWB and attending other community events at Hope Blooms created a different food environment than at home, where women felt they ate healthier meals.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem represented the overlap and relationship between two or more of women's immediate settings, particularly the women's homes, HB and the larger community of North End Halifax. Being part of the EWB group which was associated with HB influenced the connections women created with other community groups. HB's involvement with the North End community extended to EWB, where some of the women exemplified both pride and care for their communities. The relationships formed with students who had had internship placements at Hope Blooms, as well as other professionals such as the medicinal cannabis consultant

broadened women's networks and provided opportunities for learning as well as social engagement.

With regard to engagement with food, the environment of HB and the women's homes intersected. It seemed engaging in conversations around nutrition with dietetic interns at HB had shifted awareness and knowledge of food preparation. Having lunch and trying new foods at HB was even influential in how one woman participated in her own neighbourhood where she would invite friends or family over to share different recipes she had enjoyed with EWB.

Exosystem

As seniors, the women's immediate settings are impacted differently by social structures which influence policies, programs and community organization and infrastructure. Retirement, bereavement and living alone can impacts individual's financial status and for some women, receiving a monthly government income was insufficient to purchase healthy food. Furthermore, food availability both in terms of cost, and accessibility shaped women's engagement with food and food choices.

The community where Hope Blooms and many members of Empowered Women Blossom reside, continues to undergo development which is often deemed as gentrification^{61,63}, and one woman felt seniors were not prioritized within these changes. One individual identified the need for greater focus on seniors housing with the development of new residences in the neighbourhood. Participants also spoke of the lack of places for seniors to go, which seemed to enhance their appreciation for having Hope Blooms as a place that not only hosts seniors but includes, acknowledges and empowers them.

Macrosystem

Ideologies, and widely shared social and cultural values and norms around aging, health, food and nutrition manifested in various aspects of this research. The way women talked about being a senior in their community, and their desire to participate was influenced by ageism, or the stereotypical beliefs and values that are held about aging adults. Negotiating their age with their ability to participate revealed the societal expectations that seniors are often no longer active in their communities.²

Aging is often believed to be a phase of health deterioration, and women expressed additional concern and need to take care of themselves because they are seniors. The notions around taking care of oneself with age seemed to inform how women valued the nutrition education sessions at HB. Nutritionism and healthism were also present in how the women talked about their health and their eating behaviours. The reduction of food to its nutrient content to promote health⁹⁷ was influential in how some of the women talked about various food items, nutrients such or trends such as sugar, salt, and low carbohydrate diets. The idea that healthy food is a personal choice seemed to intersect with women's immediate environments such as their home, where they criticized themselves as having unhealthy eating behaviours.

Chronosystem

Life events and transitions that happened over time such as bereavement, retirement, and onset of health complications were factors that shifted women's environment at home and within their communities. Within the HB space, women's connection to the youth evolved over time as the

youth grew up and began cooking for the seniors and developing respect for EWB's role within the organization.

Transitions over time also impacted exosystem factors such as accessibility of grocery stores, cost of living, and opportunities for social engagement within their community. The influence of time seemed to be particularly impactful on women's engagement with food. A gradual loss of interest in preparing meals, decreased access to food establishments as a result of structural changes, and family leaving the home all influenced how women engaged with food.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to understand what it means to senior aged women to have a common space to gather and share a meal by achieving three objectives 1) understand participants experience having lunch with fellow EWB members at Hope Blooms, 2) describe what being a senior woman in the community means to the participants, and 3) explore participants engagement with food and how this may have changed over time. A phenomenological approach was executed with the intention and assumption that shared experiences of humans have core meanings and are shaped through collective experiences, which in this case was the shared experience of gathering in a community space for lunch once a week. Women talked about gathering with fellow EWB members, yet it was clear that the lived experiences of the women informed meanings that were unique and intimate to each participant. The interconnection, and relationships between and within the spheres of influences of the theoretical framework was insightful to how the participants negotiated their identities as women, daughters, grandmothers, community members, queer, seniors, and many others, which

influenced the meanings they ascribed to being part of Empowered Women Blossom at Hope Blooms and being a senior woman in the community. Three main themes emerged.

6.1. Research Objective 1: To understand participants experience having lunch with fellow EWB members at Hope Blooms

Membership with EWB meant acceptance into Hope Blooms where respect and love were reciprocated, and knowledge was shared. The authenticity of the group and the diversity in terms of personality, culture, and life experience that was present within HB and EWB created a culture of care and acceptance, demonstrating how connections across differences strengthens communities.⁶⁸ Positive aging in communities which is characterized by continued involvement in relationships and active participation in meaningful activities,²³ seemed to be a relevant outcome as women talked openly and proudly about being a respected senior within the Hope Blooms community.

Values and lessons gained from intergenerational relationships such as learning respect are important to cultivate age-friendly spaces and deconstruct ageism, however, is hindered as individuals tend to organize themselves, and socialize based on age.^{67,68} The women's involvement with Hope Blooms, and the intergenerational cohesion of the organization led to positive health outcomes such as social inclusion. Connecting with youth meant the women could share their knowledge and wisdom as seniors and feel a sense of purpose.

6.2. Research Objective 2: Describe what being a senior woman in the community means to the participants

The ageist ideals that are unconsciously practiced and engrained in society was apparent for some women as they acknowledged that being a senior, based on the stereotypes of aging, meant that participating in society is hindered.^{2,18,70} Yet, the women advocated for community cohesion, exemplifying the important roles senior women play in their communities; preserving shared meanings, values and support for the welfare of those who are underserved or underrepresented.^{23,65}

An intention of this research was to illuminate the voices of aging women to contribute to an expanding narrative that senior women are not a homogenous group, and contribute to communities with their unique experiences, knowledge and interests. The women represented characteristics of senior women that did not resonate with the image of frailty and vulnerability. Empowered Women Blossom seemed to embody the multiple dimensions of aging, demonstrating how being a senior who is empowered and active in their community can coexist with being a senior who desires to be taken care of and prioritized. Hope Blooms provided a platform for these women to come together as a group and collectively work to reach out to their community and support those in need, while simultaneously be supported and cared for. The women of EWB provided further understanding of how senior women and their resiliency as well as nurturing and wise nature are critical resources to the social fabric of our communities.²³

6.3. Research Objective 3: Explore participants engagement with food and how this may have changed over time

The participants perceptions of their diet and how they related it to nutrition and health provided insight to the abundance of information individuals filter through day-to-day to make choices

around food.³³ The meanings ascribed to having lunch with the other women of Empowered Women Blossom within the context of food engagement illustrated the personal nature of these relationships, informed by an individual's past and ever changing over the life course. Cooking alone, navigating changes to health, and awareness of nutrition messaging were influential in how women talked about food.

The women connected age-related physiological changes that they experienced or anticipated they would experience to taking care of one's health through nutrition. For some women, circumstances under which women did not have control, such as adequate income, or accessible transportation influenced their perspectives on achieving certain food choices. The incorporation of nutrition education led to outcomes that encompassed the complex aspects of nutrition in relation to health and how it is communicated. While women were enthusiastic to learn new information around food and nutrition, there was ambivalence, uncertainty and self-surveillance out of concern of making unhealthy food choices. Healthism and dietary health risks were underlying notions around how women framed their ideas of a healthy diet.^{33,79} In particular, the binary categorization of food as health, unhealthy and good or bad³³ was a prominent characteristic in how the women described their diet and was notable when comparing their diet of eating alone versus eating with others.

Recalling the words of Deborah Lupton "it is highly problematic to separate food preferences from social contact" provides an appropriate frame of the participants engagement with food, especially within the context of aging.⁵ It seemed that the idea of sitting down for a meal with others was valued as healthy in comparison to individual eating habits such as snacking

throughout the day or evening. The women's perceived personal responsibility to take care of themselves as they age and eat wealthy was a clear concern, but the experience of being alone meant loss of motivation, care or meaning in order to do so.

While participants all seemed to have some kind of connection with food, they also challenged the gendered role of women as the primary food provisioner. Feminist critiques of the innate connection to cooking and caring which are characterized as female traits and central to performing one's gender as a female⁶ resonated as some women talked about their dislike for cooking, or preference of having others cook for them. Nevertheless, the function of food as a bridge to social connection, and symbol of culture, identity, celebration, family and togetherness was present.

7. Reflexive Considerations and Limitations of the Research

*“Phenomenology is a project of sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence—sober, in the sense that reflecting on experience must be thoughtful, and as much as possible, free from theoretical, prejudicial and suppositional intoxications. But, phenomenology is also a project that is driven by fascination: being swept up in a spell of wonder, a fascination with meaning.”*⁷¹ - Max van Manen

While one can interpret participant's experiences from evidence-based research and the critical understanding of how political and social structures shape individuals' experiences, each person and their stories are ultimately impossible to fully understand as an outsider. The theoretical frameworks and peer reviewed literature only partially contextualize what may be real for

people. Checking one's assumptions and bias is critical, and just as critical is checking one's attachment to ideas, and theories, and the excitement or anticipation to fit a participant experience into that of another. This is the beauty and the potential harm of qualitative research and phenomenology; of presenting the participants reality exactly as it appears to them while simultaneously trying to make meaning of it. While I realized how much past experiences with the women over our two-year relationship helped, I began to realize that I didn't know many of their values, their challenges and their pasts. However, the relationship that was developed over the past two years mirrored many of the values held by EWB and HB, such as mutual respect, trust and acceptance. I began to know the participants even more after the interviews, through member checking and email follow ups, and their participant descriptions.

I believed forming a relationship with my participants would be advantageous to make meaning of their experiences with truth and accuracy, and that bracketing any presumptions would mitigate errors. Each time I read through the interview transcripts, the women's statements revealed themselves differently, and unexpected events added a new angle to how they were approached. Specifically, the outbreak of COVID-19 resulting in a global pandemic, overlapped with brutality and murder of Black citizens which stimulated one of the largest and most powerful Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements I've witnessed in my lifetime introduced an added layer of complexity. These events forced me into discomfort and think about my place and privilege in this community, in academia, and in the world. The BLM movement in particular was a push to think deeply about the history of the African Nova Scotian people and North End of Halifax in a way that was not articulated within my initial literature review. Without a doubt,

it is troublesome that such severe circumstances are what transformed the reflexivity I brought into the research.

Attempting to gain an understanding of the women's experiences within their communities and with food cannot be isolated from one's cultural or ethnic identity. Being an African Nova Scotian woman in Halifax whose family may have resided there for generations would certainly inform one's life and identity in a way that I as a white settler cannot relate to. Literature which examined the experience of women of colour was referenced, however, the lived experiences of the group and within the group differ from my own and influence how we relate to one another. Had my position as the primary researcher been occupied by an African Nova Scotian woman, or someone who reflects the racial diversity of the group, there may have been a different comfort level and trust from participants. While phenomenology aims to eliminate one's preconceptions and biases, the way we view, perceive, and understand the world is shaped by our collective experiences. This research project would have taken a different shape as the approach taken to understand the women's experiences would yield different meanings based on the identity and lived experience of the researcher.

There are other aspects of my identity that may have influenced the information I gathered and what the women choose to share with me. As a nutrition student and dietetic intern, it is possible the participants talked more about nutrition and health within the context of food and meals throughout their interviews. During the sessions, we enjoyed dessert and other foods that may be thought of as "unhealthy". Yet, while some of the women talked about the uncertainty, and concern they had about certain "unhealthy" nutrients in food, I realized that I may have (and

likely did) contribute to the mass of nutritional cacophony that they are inundated with.

Furthermore, I value and talk about the cultural significance of food yet did not apply this within the nutrition education sessions with Empowered Women Blossom. While accessible, affordable, and easy meals were centred in what was prepared, I failed to consult, incorporate, and learn about the women's food choices that reflected their cultures. Further, I recognize the need to centre culturally diverse foods within healthy eating and consider how my social location has shaped my perception of healthy eating.

Finally, the involved participants were five of the eight Empowered Women Blossoms members, thus the meanings made from these five narratives does not represent the entirety of the group. Had the additional members been interviewed there would have been a more varied, and diverse collection of meanings made, that shaped understanding of the phenomena.

8. Potential contributions of the research

Findings from this research were: the benefit of intergenerational community spaces; the importance of senior women and their roles within the community; and the experience of food engagement for senior women. Many of the participants' experiences elicited appreciation of programs and initiatives in the community that included and prioritized seniors and created intergenerational spaces. There are connections and overlap between the three main themes. Potential contributions relevant to social inclusion as well as the nutrition and dietetics profession are outlined in this section.

The term *vulnerable* is commonly used to describe the aging population when assessing risk of health complications such as chronic disease, illness or infection, and psychological and social complications like depression, memory loss, and isolation.^{66,95} The recent events surrounding COVID-19 have further revealed the vulnerability of aging adults to illness as well as fatality, with 82% of COVID-19 deaths in Canada taking place in seniors' homes.⁹⁸ In Nova Scotia, 53 of the 63 COVID-19 related deaths were at one long-term care facility in North End of Halifax.⁹⁹ The severity of COVID-19 cases and deaths within the senior population were not exclusively due to older, compromised immune systems. Inadequate funding, restricted wages and physical space, as well as chronic employee shortages are a few factors that increase risk and pose challenges for proper care for residents.¹⁰⁰ Although this research took place in a community setting, the events of COVID-19 is a current example of the systemic and structural changes that are needed in the care of the senior population. The women in this research spoke honestly about the lack of places for senior to go in the community, challenges faced to purchase and prepare nutritious food as a senior, and the increased pressure to take care of their health because of their age. Their stories are examples that expand the idea of vulnerable from compromised immune systems and frailty and underline the need to continue to shift to a caring culture where our social and political structures reduce rather than contribute to vulnerability. While the participants briefly shared their feelings on the lack of inclusion for seniors, their involvement with Hope Blooms, as well as with other community organizations and care within their communities, reveals a narrative that senior women are important community members whom should not only be socially included, but people that nurture spaces and connections that include others. The participants in this project demonstrated the culture of care that is needed with their awareness and compassion to foster community spaces and to support underserved populations.

The participants' experiences also supported the importance of intergenerational spaces, where co-learning and close relationships across generations can create a sense of belonging and purpose for seniors.

Within the nutrition and dietetics profession, dietitians hold a vital role to provide care for senior populations through the dynamic changes to health that impact food intake, appetite, metabolism and risk of malnutrition.¹⁰¹ Nutrition therapy for management of chronic diseases and health conditions, that are often exacerbated over the life course, is a primary focus within the dietetic profession.¹⁰¹ However, given the detriment of aloneness on overall health, and the benefit of eating with others,²⁶ emphasis on the social and environmental factors within nutrition assessment, and awareness of the feasibility and reality of eating with others for lone seniors should be a point of focus for dietitians. Moreover, employing criticality to refrain from judgement and stereotyping seniors should be practiced within patient-centred care,⁹³ and is necessary as project participants have demonstrated the individuality and heterogeneity of senior women.

The findings of this research, particularly the meanings made from the participants' experiences, may be used in advocacy for dietitians within community organizations such as Hope Blooms, and to acknowledge the dynamic roles they assume within community settings. Food centres and other grassroots organizations that advocate for food justice have demonstrated how creating dignified spaces which bring people together through provision of healthy community meals is an effective way to build community and challenge unjust food systems and food insecurity.^{83,102} While food centres may address eating socially and enhance equitable access to food, the

participants of this research illustrated the complex nature of food choice which is further impacted by experiences related to aging. Green et al., explored the prevalence of food insecurity for senior women; dietitian advocacy was recommended for programs, services, and policies to improve senior's food security status.²⁰ Green et al., also recommended development of collective kitchen and dining programs to increase socialization, motivation to cook and eat, and to provide nutrient-dense meals.²⁰ Within this research project with EWB, women mentioned diabetes, blood pressure, and metabolism as a few of the health-related circumstances they were living with and managing. Opportunity for primary care dietitians within community organizations where nutrition education and collective learning for chronic disease management are included into community meals may be effective way to meet the multifaceted needs of senior women, incorporating the cultural and social relevance of eating.

As Betty mentioned “We are seniors and so we want to take care of ourselves and our health.” That being said, must dietitians understand the impact of lay and public health nutrition messaging, and actively work to dismantle the medicalization of food, and pervasiveness of nutritionism,^{79,98} and structure senior's nutrition programs based on the participants strengths. Dietitians must acknowledge the uniqueness of aging peoples, actively avoiding assumptions around diet and lifestyle within the senior population to mitigate reductionist approaches to health and lifestyle modifications which are often unethical as they favour those who benefit most from structural, socio-political factors.⁹³

Within the profession of nutrition and dietetics, there is a tendency toward healthism and nutritionism, characterized by a fixation on nutrient content and specific foods, or eating patterns

are prescribed based on a person's assessed metabolic function. Through sharing past stories of lived experiences, memories, and trauma, participants of this research have underlined how the historical context of one's life is reflected in their values and behaviours around eating. For dietitians, understanding and honouring a person's life story and their pasts should not be stigmatized when perceived as a less clinical or effective approach to practice. Considering the professional socialization of dietitians as discussed by MacLellan, Lordly and Gingras⁸⁹ whom highlight the roles that preceptors and instructors occupy in supporting and shaping future dietitians' professional identities may be relevant to this research. Reconnecting with eating as an embodied experience where individuals connect personally as well as to others is critical in creating pleasurable experience and acknowledges that the social value engrained in food can cultivate sustenance and meaning of food far beyond its nutrient content. Centring participants preferences, food skills, past experiences, and wisdom is critical for quality of life and maintaining joy around eating.³ These values may be acknowledged and incorporated into the profession of dietetics by educators.

The industrialization of food systems has led to recommendations such as “eat like your granny” or “don't eat anything your great grandma wouldn't recognize as food”.⁹⁸ These catchy messages are essentially encouraging people to move toward a more traditional, or culturally relevant way of eating, consuming more homemade and seasonal and fewer commercially produced foods. While there are caveats to this idealistic message (even our great grandmothers faced inequitable food access) the sentiment should be considered that great grandmothers were wise in what they prepared and how they enjoyed food should be considered. Celebrating the cultural and social symbolism of food, and minimizing concern around micronutrients, calories, or convenience is

important to integrate community spaces where individuals can eat together. Moreover, intergenerational connections are essential to carry food rituals throughout generations and honour senior women as sources of knowledge.

On a more personal level, and within the context of systemic change, I hope that by learning about the findings of this project, readers will begin to recognize senior women in their communities and the vital role they play while also being mindful of the unconscious thoughts and biases that may reflect ageist stereotypes. My sentiment toward the health of the aging population is accurately captured by Morley that “the responsibility that I’m feeling isn’t resting with the person who’s the old person, it’s resting with the community around them.”¹⁹ By crossing boundaries of age, gender, ethnicity, religion, social class and education’, we build stronger communities and opportunities to eat together.³² Acknowledging the influence of ageist ideals in shaping the experience of seniors and thinking critically and reflexively about how communities are constructed to support seniors is important to dismantle ageism and create age friendly spaces.

9. Recommendations for Future Research

Within the field of nutrition and dietetics, the implications of nutrition messaging on senior women’s diets and perceptions of their diet could be further explored. In particular, the sources of nutrition information that are most influential to seniors may be advantageous for dietitians and other health care practitioners to understand and gain insight to the negative impacts of lay nutrition messaging.

The manifestation of nutrition messaging for those who face challenges accessing food due to social inequality may also be useful to understand how individuals are impacted differently. For LGBTQIA2S+ seniors who have experienced isolation and marginalization as a result of living during a time that was represented as heteronormative and homophobic, poorer access to health care and support networks is a common outcome.⁶⁶ Understanding how social exclusion and poorer access to health care impact the diet of seniors and the sources they seek out for information such as media.

Diversity and inclusion are becoming increasingly important priorities within the nutrition and dietetics profession. Research on LGBTQ and transinclusive dietetic practice,¹⁰⁴ cultural food security, and impact of culture on meal satisfaction in long-term care,¹⁰⁵ are a few emerging areas within nutrition and dietetics. While the barriers seniors experience in achieving adequate nutrition is understood, intersecting the experience of age with other social identities could provide a more in depth and comprehensive understanding of intersectionality and the social determinants of health and how this shapes the way senior women of varying backgrounds internalize nutrition and health information. The frequency of terms such as healthy, unhealthy, good and bad that were used by the participants to describe eating behaviours warrants exploration of what healthy and unhealthy means to the senior population in relation to diet. Participants mentioned high blood pressure and slow metabolism, which prompted curiosity of how general health recommendations and risks related to age-related changes are communicated to seniors. Future research focusing on the impact of healthism within the aging population, and how dietetic practice perpetuates healthism and nutritionism may be beneficial for dietitians and health care professionals providing person-centred care.

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Appendix A. Letter of Information



Letter of Information and Consent Form

Dear Empowered Women Blossom Member,

Spending time with the Empowered Women Blossom group has inspired to me gain a better understanding of your experience and what having a space like Hope Blooms to gather and share a meal with the fellow members of Empowered Women Blossom means to you. As a student in the Master of Science in Applied Human Nutrition Program at Mount Saint Vincent University, this project titled, *More Than A Meal: Senior Women Connecting Through Food in a Community Space*, will be my thesis supervised under Dr. Daphne Lordly.

Participating in my research project is by no means mandatory and will certainly have no effect on your relationship with the rest of the group or with Hope Blooms. To keep your choice to participate confidential, I am asking all individuals please return their envelope with the form **signed if participating or scratched out if not**. I am hoping to hold individual interviews with those who are interested in participating. Should you choose to participate, I will contact you to schedule an interview according to your preference of time and location. The interview will be an open-ended, informal conversation approximately one hour long with a few questions regarding your experience with Empowered Women Blossom, and your engagement with food as an aging woman. With your consent, the interview will be recorded with an audio recorder, and only I, Samara Ohm will have access to any identifying information. Below are some questions you may have regarding your participation. Please don't hesitate to reach out to myself, my supervisor Daphne, or Jessie if you have any questions using the contact information below.

What are the risks of participating in this study? There are minimal risks anticipated. If any questions asked are upsetting in any way you may choose not to answer them, ask that the recording device be turned off, or take a break at any time. You can choose to end your involvement in the study at any time with no consequence for your withdrawal. If you choose to participate you will be sharing personal information, and maintaining your privacy is of great importance. To ensure personal confidentiality, and minimize any risks, all information will be communicated using pseudonyms (fake names). While the use of fake names will remove your identification with your story, given the uniqueness of EWB and Hope Blooms it is not feasible to promise complete confidentiality.

How will my interview be kept confidential? The interview recordings and transcripts will only be accessible by the researcher and supervisor. Once the recorded interview is transcribed it will be permanently deleted. The transcribed interviews will be stored on secured computers that are only accessible by password. Any paper files will be stored in the supervisors locked office.

What are the benefits of participating in this study? Your knowledge and experiences will help contribute to the understanding of experiences for aging women, how communities can better support the aging population, and the importance of social connection around food.

What will happen to the information gathered from my interview? The results of the research will be summarized into a final thesis report, as well as shared in scholarly presentations related to the researchers topic, with potential for publication of written content in scholarly journals. There is a section below to indicate whether you prefer to keep the information from your interview within my final thesis report and excluded from future presentations or publications.

Will I have access to the information gathered from my interview? Yes, you may read the transcript of your interview and choose to eliminate any information you do not want included. You will also receive a summary of the information gathered from all interviews.

Are there any costs involved with participating in this study?

There will be no costs involved, and any transportation costs will be covered or reimbursed.

Contact Information:

Samara Ohm: samara.ohm@msvu.ca

Daphne Lordly: daphne.lordly@msvu.ca

Jessie Jollymore:

If you wish to take part in this project and feel comfortable with the information on this consent form please sign the following and add your preferred contact information. If you would not like to participate, draw a line through the section below and return your envelope.

I understand the information shared in my interview will be recorded with audio and written notes, and I give permission for my information to be used in Samara's thesis presentations and related reports and material such as presentations **YES/NO**

Participant's name (Print)

Participant's Signature

Date ^{SEP}

Contact Information

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Researcher's name (Print)

Researcher's Signature

Date

If you have any further questions about this research and wish to speak with someone not involved in the study, you may contact Brenda Gagne, the Coordinator of the University Research Ethics Board (UREB) MSVU Research Office, at 457-6350 or via e-mail at Brenda.gagne@msvu.ca.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact: Manager, Research Ethics Board Secretariat^[SEP]Holland Cross Building, Tower A 11 Holland Avenue, Suite 511, Address Locator #3005B Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0K9 Phone number (613) 941-5199 Fax (613) 941-9093^[SEP]Email: REB-CER@hc-sc.gc.ca

Appendix B. Interview Guide

<p>1. What is your favourite meal you've had with Empowered Women Blossom?</p>	<p>As the opening question, the intent for this simple question is for participants to relax and start reflecting on their time with the group. It may also open prompts to what aspects of this made it their favourite or most memorable.</p>
<p>2. Tell me about having lunch with the other women of Empowered Women Blossom</p>	<p>Asking about with the other members of Empowered Women Blossom is more focused on the connections and relationships formed around the table.</p>
<p>3. Tell me about how if at all, your engagement with food has changed over the years as a member of the group?</p>	<p>Asking about the participants engagement with food over time may lead to prompts around how being a member of Empowered Women Blossom has played a role in their engagement with food, and how if it at all it may extend into the rest of their day or week.</p>
<p>4. As a senior woman in the community, what does being part of this group mean to you?</p>	<p>This question is aimed at understanding what the participants experience as a senior woman, and a senior woman within their community means.</p>
<p>5. If you were inviting a friend to come to the group, what would you tell them about it?</p>	<p>Getting an idea of how the participants would share or talk about Empowered Women Blossom with close friends may provide a different perspective.</p>
<p>6. Is there anything else you would like to add?</p>	<p>This final, closing question is an open-ended way to inquire about any unintended findings should the participants have any further thoughts they would like to include</p>

Appendix C. Ethics Approval



University Research Ethics Board (UREB)

Certificate of Research Ethics Clearance

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Clearance	<input type="checkbox"/>	Secondary Data Clearance	<input type="checkbox"/>	Renewal	<input type="checkbox"/>	Modification	<input type="checkbox"/>	Change to Study Personnel
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Effective Date	January 29, 2020	Expiry Date	January 28, 2021
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File #:	2019-133
Title of project:	More than a Meal: Senior Women Connecting through Food in a Community Space
Researcher(s):	Samara Ohm
Supervisor (if applicable):	Daphne Lordly
Co-Investigators:	n/a
Version :	1

The University Research Ethics Board (UREB) has reviewed the above named research proposal and confirms that it respects the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* and Mount Saint Vincent University's policies, procedures and guidelines regarding the ethics of research involving human participants. This certificate of research ethics clearance is valid for a period of **one year** from the date of issue.

Researchers are reminded of the following requirements:	
Changes to Protocol	Any changes to approved protocol must be reviewed <u>and</u> approved by the UREB prior to their implementation. Form: REB.FORM.002 Info: REB.SOP.113 Policy: REB.POL.003
Changes to Research Personnel	Any changes to approved persons with access to research data must be reported to the UREB immediately. Form: REB.FORM.002 Info: REB.SOP.113 Policy: REB.POL.003
Annual Renewal	Annual renewals are contingent upon an annual report submitted to the UREB prior to the expiry date as listed above. You may renew up to four times, at which point the file must be closed and a new application submitted for review. Form: REB.FORM.003 Info: REB.SOP.116 Policy: REB.POL.003
Final Report	A final report is due on or before the expiry date. Form: REB.FORM.004 Info: REB.SOP.116 Policy: REB.POL.003
Privacy Breach	Researchers must inform the UREB immediately and submit the Privacy Breach form. The breach will be investigated by the REB and the FOIPOP Officer. Form: REB.FORM.015
Unanticipated Research Event	Researchers must inform the UREB immediately and submit a report to the UREB within seven (7) working days of the event. Form: REB.FORM.008 Info: REB.SOP.115 Policy: REB.POL.003
Adverse Research Event	Researchers must inform the UREB immediately and submit a report to the UREB within two (2) working days of the event. Form: REB.FORM.007 Info: REB.SOP.114 Policy: REB.POL.003

*For more information: <http://www.msvu.ca/ethics>



Dr. Daniel Séguin, Chair
University Research Ethics Board

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