# At Her Age:

# Exploring Perceptions of Successful Aging with Older Women Engaged with Volunteerism in Nova Scotia

Sharon E. Amey

Master of Arts in Education (Lifelong Learning)

Mount Saint Vincent University

Master's Thesis

January 15, 2025

**Dedication**

To Anne, Helga, Louise, Nancy, Sherry, and Trilby, for sharing yourself with your communities and for sharing your experiences with me. To Mary (aka Gim) who has been a source of inspiration in so many ways, including my own endeavour at Mount Saint Vincent University.

**Abstract**

While volunteerism is often viewed as giving back to a community, it also presents opportunities for learning and growth for the volunteer. The purpose of this study was to explore older women's experiences with volunteerism, including volunteerism as a context for lifelong learning and how this contributes to successful aging. This was a phenomenological inquiry of six women's experiences with volunteerism in Nova Scotia. Experiences were explored through individual interviews and enhanced by arts-based methods, specifically that during interviews the women shared an object that is meaningful to her volunteer experience. Transcripts of interviews and digital images of objects were analyzed and compiled into themes. Themes describing the volunteer experience centred on a sense of purpose, giving back, identification with their volunteer mission, incorporating volunteerism into their lifestyle, and the social nature of volunteering. Themes around learning included organized learning for their role, unintentional learning, learning through experience, and self-transformation through learning. As a context for successful aging, the women value that volunteering allows for personal growth, continued connection to others, and maintaining a positive outlook. This study revealed that volunteering is a unique experience with highly-valued, multifaceted returns to the volunteer. Socialization is a crucial element to all three experiences of volunteering, learning, and aging successfully. All participants readily identify as lifelong learners and volunteering is one way they pursue learning. Similarly, they each have a clear vision of what successful aging looks like to her, and volunteering is a conscious activity towards realizing her vision.

**Acknowledgements**

To Professor Ardra Cole, I am so grateful for your knowledge, humanity, and passion for arts-informed research. Your classes in my early days at Mount Saint Vincent are what inspired this research, and I am so fortunate to have had your continued guidance at every step along the way. To Professor Mary Jane Harkins, thank you for your support and encouragement, reinforcing that this is an important area of exploration, right from the initial stages of this research. To Professor Scott MacPhail, our conversations enriched the many iterations of my research question and I thank you for your time, humour, and perspective. I must also thank the Mount Saint Vincent community. My time here has been as fulfilling and impactful as I had hoped it would be.

This experience is only possible because of the support my parents afforded me in education from a young age, which Brad has continued in more recent years. Thank you all for your encouragement and patience over the last many years.

Thank you to the volunteer organizations represented in this research: ElderDog Canada, Feed Nova Scotia, Grandmothers for Grandmothers, Mission Mart, the Royal Nova Scotia International Tattoo, the Tartan Team, and Victorian Order of Nurses (VON). As you serve your communities, this research also shows the impact you make on those who serve alongside you. And finally, to the six women who participated in this research, thank you for sharing your time and experiences. The time we spent together was both a pleasure and an honour for me.

Table of Contents

## Chapter 1: Introduction, Background and Rationale

Older women actively engage with volunteerism. In Canada, approximately one-third of women 65 years and older are volunteers (Hahmann, 2021). Working with others towards a shared mission makes volunteering a context rife for learning. The purpose of this study was to explore older women's experiences with volunteerism, including volunteerism as a context for lifelong learning and how this contributes to successful aging. I gathered experiences through interviews of six women who live and volunteer in Nova Scotia. To enhance interviews, the exploration also involved objects, chosen by the women to signify what volunteerism means to them.

This research is significant to both our collective society and how we choose to live as individuals. Canada and Nova Scotia, in particular, has an aging population (Nova Scotia Department of Seniors, 2017). There already exists systemic shortfalls in housing (Nova Scotia Department of Seniors, 2017) and health care (Province of Nova Scotia, 2022) aimed at older adults. There is a collective growing concern about the increasing resources and associated costs required to meet the needs of aging Canadians. Where the gaps in available services are obvious to Canadians, less attention is paid to how older adults choose to live in their later years. The women who participated in this research represent Canadians who are seeking ways to live independently and maintain their independence for as long as possible. In doing so, they are learning and adapting to changing situations and ways of successful aging.

The collective rationale for this research is quite loud. Life expectancy for recently born Canadians is nearly 80 years for men and nearly 84 years for women (Statistics Canada, 2019, Table 13-10-0389-01). In Nova Scotia, by the year 2030 it is expected that one quarter of the population will be older than 65 years (Nova Scotia Department of Seniors, 2017). While life expectancy is increasing, it is not clear that improvements to quality of life in later years is keeping pace. Health expectancy–a quality of life measure of the expected number of years of life lived in good health–has remained relatively stable for Canadians

(Bushnik et al., 2018). People are living longer, but these additional years are not necessarily spent in good health.

From a population perspective, as life expectancy climbs for a significant proportion of people, having a healthier, independent, and engaged population is important. Nova Scotia's health system is strained. A host of challenges persist such as high systemic costs, barriers to access both general and specialized care, and insufficient and outdated infrastructure (Province of Nova Scotia, 2022). The current and projected health system is not equipped to sufficiently care for an older population that is expected to have increasing healthcare needs. There is also a lack of care homes and facilities. The Conference Board of Canada estimates that by 2035 an additional 199,000 care beds are required to meet growing demand. The additional infrastructure will cost $64 billion to build and further yearly operating costs of $7 billion (Gibbard, 2017).

**The Distinct Aging Experience of Women**

This research does not seek to solve the loud, systemic needs that face our aging population. Instead, it will focus on ways individuals adapt and maintain a broad scope of good health and successful aging. In an ungendered sense, further exploration of this work is significant to all individuals since most of us will live a long life and many of us will support someone, such as a parent or a spouse, in their older years. There is great individual and societal benefit to understanding how others learn and adapt throughout the aging process and how learning contributes to healthy aging. Understanding the experiences of others enlightens our own perceptions of what it means to age successfully, and empowers us to make informed choices and to strive towards our own vision of successful aging.

This research specifically explores the experience of women. Canadian women outlive their male counterparts by approximately five years (Statistics Canada, 2019, Table 13-10-0389-01). Women also face a host of sex-based disparities including lower lifetime earnings resulting in food and housing insecurities and greater risk of age-related illnesses (Grami, 2022). This means that women are more

likely to spend their later years living alone, requiring resources to maintain independence and good quality of life. Research has shown that despite the government's objective to create more care beds, older women prefer to age in place, maintaining independence for as long as possible. For example, in her dissertation work and with her own lived experience, Olive Bryanton explored how a group of older women in rural Prince Edward Island are aging in place. She describes the women as active contributors to their communities and the women discuss the importance of agency, social involvement, and informal support as enablers to aging in place (Bryanton, 2018). Despite the advancing feminist movement, older women are often perceived as vulnerable. The experiences and achievements of older women are too often overlooked or demeaned, punctuated by the clause '*at her age*'. The objective of this work is to show how older women actively engage with their community though volunteerism and take control of their health and independence.

**At Her Age! A Personal Reflection**

My maternal grandmother was enthralled with learning. Two things always make me think of my grandmother: blue spruce trees and Hilroy notebooks. My grandmother read voraciously and would write her reflections in Hilroy notebooks on everything she read. She also used those notebooks with me. She would create math and writing workbooks, and then sit with me to review my work. For her, it was not about perfection, but the process. When I was in elementary school, my grandmother enrolled in university. While she had completed Normal College years before, she dreamed of attending university. She once told me about a professor who curtly questioned her during class as to why she wanted to take university classes *at her age.* To which my grandmother replied, "*to show my children that you never stop learning*."

My great aunt—my grandmother's sister-in-law—was a single, career-focused woman. She socialized and networked with like-minded women. When she turned 70, she was forced into retirement by the same company she had worked for her entire working life. Retirement would not come as a shock

to most 70-year olds, but my aunt's world was turned upside down. Her self identity and a large part of her social group were gone overnight. Before long she discovered that volunteer groups filled the void that work had left. For her remaining years, she bonded with new social connections, developed new interests, and created a new sense of purpose.

My paternal grandmother was gentle and kind. She was a nurse and nurtured her children, her husband, and all of their interests. When I knew her in her older years, she was a sociable woman who made lasting friendships through her neighbourhood bridge club and women's guild. I would get to know the women, myself, as I attended the neighbourhood and church events that they held. They were fun, kind, and supportive throughout the later years of my grandmother's life.

When I was very young, I would often brag of my university-student grandmother. I thought my grandmother was different from everyone else's, actively learning and challenging herself everyday. As my interpretation of learning has expanded, I now understand that my grandmother was atypical as a university student, but completely typical as an older adult learner. In fact, my three matriarchs show how people can engage with lifelong learning in very different ways, that are most meaningful to them.

**The Volunteer Context**

As I have witnessed in my own life and as the women in this study have expressed, when there is a job to be done a volunteer's hand will raise. There are countless ways our communities benefit from, and even rely on, the service of others. We celebrate the contribution of volunteers and sometimes quantify their service in terms of time and money that they contribute to society. Nevertheless, as the published literature reviewed in this research shows, even when research explores outcomes of volunteerism, the exploration is seldom on the volunteer. This study aims to explore the often-overlooked experience of the volunteer.

Volunteerism provides a viable and valuable context for aging adults to engage with lifelong learning. Indeed, the oldest Canadian volunteers (those born before 1965) contribute more hours

annually, on average, than any other age group (Hahmann, 2021). Volunteerism ranges from international organizations to local initiatives and spans countless interests. Just as the scope of volunteer initiatives are expansive, the opportunities for volunteerism are accessible and accommodate varying time commitments and intensities. As volunteerism is internally-motivated (in other words, no financial compensation), it can be inferred that an individual who is donating their time and efforts has a demonstrated interest and is looking to actively engage in the volunteer initiative.

While volunteerism is often viewed as *giving back*, it also provides various learning opportunities. Of particular importance to successful aging is non-formal learning and informal learning. Non-formal learning is systematic and planned but outside of formal learning institutions. In a volunteer context, this could include gaining knowledge around a cause or skills and processes involved with the volunteer role. Informal learning is learning that is unintentional and unplanned and occurs in everyday living. In a volunteer context, this could be cultivated through discussions with others and observing others' actions. Non-formal and informal learning may be especially relevant to manage the changing environmental and lifestyle factors that come with aging.

A volunteer context was intentionally chosen for this research. Lifelong learning by definition spans a lifetime. Volunteerism provides a context for discussion and a framework to better understand the opportunities for learning beyond the typical working years. Volunteerism is a useful context to explore the experiences of women engaging with lifelong learning for successful aging through volunteerism. Women are actively engaged with volunteerism throughout the lifespan, but spend increasing time, on average, with increasing age (Hahmann, 2021). Women have longer life expectancies than men do, but also report proportionally fewer years in good health than men (Bushnik et al., 2018). Exploring ways to maintain good health and independence is therefore especially important for women. I hope that this work contributes to a larger movement towards normalizing learning among older adult

women; that recognizing achievement and activity by older women is no longer punctuated by *at her age*.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Concepts of Aging

There are varying opinions over appropriate and respectful terminology for older adults. In seminal work, Peter Laslett (1991) proposes a "third age" of life. He characterizes the third age as a period of personal fulfillment and rewarding activities that follow life stages of dependency (childhood) and then responsibility (acting in a provisionary role for their own children). Laslett proposes that we should prolong the third age for as long as possible before we ultimately revert to a period of dependency, frailty, and ultimately, death. Many academics have embraced and continue use of this term; however, others oppose this for ageist views of burden and diminishing opportunities. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, for example, proposes a "third chapter" as an opportunity for personal growth and fulfillment. She proposes that the years between 50 and 75 should explore individuals' passion and creativity, guided by accumulated wisdom (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2009). Contrary to Laslett, Lawrence-Lightfoot does not predicate that this chapter should be celebrated before an ultimate return to dependency. Beyond academic discourse, there is similar variation in use and perception of terms such as senior, elder, and those in later life. In my research, I will use the term, "older adults" which is in accordance with updated terminology used in national studies on aging (Statistics Canada, 2021).

### Perceptions of Successful Aging

Towards the end of the 20th century, perceptions about aging began to shift. Prior to the shift, aging was traditionally considered in medical terms, by the absence or presence of disease and disability. It was thought that changes such as declining cognitive ability were a normal part of aging. Formative work in this area was conducted by gerontologists Rowe and Kahn (1987) who asserted that negative effects of aging are exaggerated and not necessarily intrinsic to aging at all. They propose that lifestyle factors (such as diet and exercise) and social supports are important mediators in the effects of aging. They argue that these factors can heighten the usual effects of aging, or can play a neutral or

positive role, helping someone to age *successfully.* They argue that people who age successfully show no or few age-related declines. The pair later proposed a definition of successful aging as "low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life" (Rowe and Kahn, 1997, pg. 443).

Other authors have proposed different definitions of successful aging (also referred to as healthy aging, positive aging, active aging, aging well). Definitions typically incorporate aspects of physical and mental health, and increasingly recognize quality of life. For example, in earlier literature, Schmidt (1994) defined successful aging as "minimal interruption of usual function". Baltes and Carstensen (1999) later conceptualized successful aging as a process of attainment of goals. As such, perceptions of successful aging are more subjective, measured against individuals' standards and values. Vaillant and Mukamal (2001) asserted that some declines are inherent to aging, but these declines should not denote aging as unsuccessful. In that way, successful aging must be viewed from three dimensions: decline, change, and development.

Several authors have researched successful aging by asking older adults what the concept means to them. In 2003, Australian researchers Knight and Riciardelli interviewed adults over 70 years about what it means to age *successfully*. Participants discussed, in descending order, topics of health, activity, personal growth, happiness, close personal relationships, independence, appreciation of life, and longevity. In 2008, Rossen et al. interviewed 31 older women about their perceptions of successful aging within the context of transitions, namely moving to an independent living facility. The women described three themes of successful aging: acceptance of life's changes, engagement both socially and with one's own self-care, and comportment, in other words, how one presents themselves to the outside world through demonstrations of positivity and appreciation. Nosraty et al. (2015) interviewed 25 women and 20 men who were 90 or 91 years old about their opinions of successful aging. The authors identified themes described by participants of: good physical and cognitive health, social

networks, a balance and harmonious life, independence, life circumstance (such as a good home environment, not living in an institution) and having a good death.

In 2020, Teater and Chonody completed a scoping review of published literature where older adults themselves expressed how they define successful aging. They found 12 common themes of: social relationships and interactions, positive thinking/attitude and optimism, being healthy, financial security, acceptance and adaptation, engagement with life, spirituality, environment and policy, autonomy and independence, cognitive health, physically active, and having a good death.

In their 'Decade of Healthy Aging 2020-2030 Action Plan', the World Health Organization (WHO) proposes healthy aging not for adding years to life, but 'adding life to years' (World Health Organization, 2017). The WHO defines Healthy Aging as developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables well-being in older age. While the WHO shares a similarly holistic and multi-dimensional view of aging well as the authors previously discussed, they recognize that maintaining well-being is influenced by factors extrinsic to the individual such as economic, education, and health inequities. For example, women are particularly vulnerable to not aging well as they have lower incomes, face barriers to accessing education and labour markets, and own fewer assets than men do. As such, they may struggle for resources to meet basic needs in older age, let alone resources for aging well.

This collection of work shows that, while interpretations differ, there is agreement that successful aging is multi-dimensional and holistic in a view of well-being. It encompasses physical and cognitive attributes, but also aspects of quality of life such as engagement with others and independence. Dimensions of successful aging recognize that age-related changes can pose challenges for the individual, but do not stop opportunities for growth and development. As perceptions of successful aging are individualized, characteristics such as gender and access to resources must be recognized as factors that impact views of and approaches to successful aging.

**Conceptualizing Lifelong Learning**

As the idea of aging in a successful way took shape, conceptualization of learning activities and learning outcomes for older adults similarly began to shift. In early concepts of lifelong learning, education for older adults was generally framed to compensate for declines. At that time, McClusky (1974) conceptualized older adults' learning needs into four categories: coping needs (physical function, independence), expressive needs (activities for the sake of doing), contributive needs (feeling useful to society), and influence needs (agency for social change). Towards the end of the twentieth century, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) published a report that contextualized lifelong learning to the increasingly globalized world. The 1996 Delors Report cautioned that the potential benefit that globalization brings to some, may come at a cost to others by contributing to marginalization and discrimination, inequality, and poverty. From a stance of social justice, the report frames the foundation of lifelong learning as four pillars of learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be (Delors, 1996). Decades later, in a study of lifelong learning of older adults in Beijing, Guo and Shan (2019) described these same pillars in terms of the individual and Chinese culture that recognizes that *learning is lifelong, and that learning has become part of our living*. These conceptualizations demonstrate what Fristrup and Grut (2016) propose as a shift from a deficit-based perspective of lifelong learning, towards empowering adults to develop life-course capabilities for active aging. They also show a holistic, enduring, and cross-cultural conceptualization of lifelong learning among older adults.

During the same period that McClusky's work led to new insights into learning needs, David Kolb introduced a new theory of how people learn. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory says that human learning comes from experience, or more simply put, the individuals learn by doing. Kolb's theory was innovative as it countered perceptions that ideas are fixed, instead proposing that ideas are formed and

reformed through experiences. In that way, learning is not an outcome but a process that is continuously created (Kolb, 2014).

Experiential learning may especially resonate with older adults who seek out learning in informal or nonformal contexts. In 2016, Kimberley et al. embarked on a review of existing literature to understand how older adults want to engage with learning. They framed the pursuit of learning into a description of 'knowhow' as: dynamic resources of knowledge, information and skills that are developed through social experiences and allow the individual to adapt to a changing world. The authors argue that for older adults, learning is less about filling knowledge gaps and more about discovery of new information. Purposeful information-seeking is therefore secondary to incidental and often unintentional acquisition of information. They cite their own previous research that knowhow is most effectively enhanced through social interactions, specifically through observations and conversations that facilitate the co-creation of knowledge. While Kimberley et al. assert the centrality of discovering new, incidental information in an often-unintentional way, learning contexts are diverse. Older adults who choose to engage with learning have expansive options to meet their preferences and needs.

**Lifelong Learning Contexts for Older Adults**

Lifelong learning contexts are typically divided into formal learning activities (institutionalized learning structures), non-formal activities (organized learning activities outside of formal institutions), and informal activities (learning through daily life activities) (European Commission, 2001). The boundaries of learning contexts are not necessarily distinct; however, they provide a useful framework to discuss and compare learning endeavours. Given the importance of lifelong learning for successful aging, researchers have explored the impacts of formal, informal, and non-formal learning contexts.

***Formal Learning Contexts***

There are numerous formal learning opportunities aimed specifically for older adults. 'Universities of a Third Age' is an international initiative to make university-style courses accessible to

older adults. They can be affiliated with traditional universities and colleges, or autonomously run by volunteers. Universities of a Third Age began in response to 1968 French legislature that universities would be responsible for provision of lifelong education (Formosa, 2014). In 2012, a subsequent proclamation from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that students entering and graduating from higher education should better reflect Europe's population similarly resulted in the creation of 'Age Friendly Universities' (Mark, 2018). Within North America is the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (OLLI), offered at member universities across the United States, to provide accessible and intellectually stimulating education to learners aged 55 years and older (Lamb and Brady, 2005). More locally, Nova Scotia has a volunteer-based program called the Seniors College Association of Nova Scotia (SCANS), which offers non-credit academic courses for adults aged 50+ (SCANS, 2021).

In 2008, Duay and Bryan purposefully sampled and interviewed 36 participants, including 26 women, over the age of 64 about perceptions of effective (and ineffective) learning experiences. The discussions centred on formal learning experiences, where participants perceived effective learning as interactive and engaging, and led by a knowledgeable and enthusiastic instructor. Participants were most drawn to subjects where they could build on knowledge or interests that they already had, rather than exploring a new topic altogether. In 2021, Obhi et al. explored personal values of older adults engaged with lifelong learning programs, such as an OLLI. Discussions revealed that participants value new experiences, giving back to others, spirituality, enjoyment of life, family, and active lifestyle.

Several researchers have explored the learning outcomes specific to formal learning contexts and concepts of successful aging. Lamb and Brady (2005) led focus groups to ask older adults who attend an OLLI to discuss how they benefit from courses. They describe intellectual stimulation including the joy and inclusivity of learning, community support, opportunity for spiritual renewal, and gaining self-esteem. Women, notably, described the learning institute as a distinct environment from their early education that was often second-class to their male counterparts and that the learning expanded their

self-perception beyond a role of supportive and caretaker. They describe feeling more interesting as a result of their experience. Hachem and Vuopala (2016) asked older adults to complete a survey on their perceived benefits after completing one term at a University of a Third Age in Lebanon. Respondents reported primarily cognitive benefits (such as intellectual stimulation and discovery purpose), followed by social (interactivity, community spirit) and psychological benefits (feeling happy and rejuvenated). Narushima et al. (2018) interviewed vulnerable seniors about their learning experiences from a formal education course. They surmised that continuous participation in a learning program works as a therapeutic self-help mechanism to counterbalance changes in their life.

Where these authors explored individual experiences and self-perceptions of benefits of learning through formal learning contexts, Jenkins and Mostafa (2015) used longitudinal data from England's Study on Aging to correlate engagement with learning with a subjective, self-reported measure of well-being. They concluded that, while informal types of learning were associated with higher well-being, there was no evidence that formal education or training courses were associated with higher well-being.

Interviews with lifelong learners in a formal context revealed numerous positive attributes including engagement, building community, and improving self-esteem. Unfortunately, there can also be barriers to accessing formal learning contexts. Formal learning contexts are often in a set physical location which may present barriers based on geography or mobility. Accessing formal learning can also feel exclusive. Narushima et al. (2008) explains that average educational levels of learners at institutes aimed at older adults (such as Universities of a Third Age) is a bachelor's degree or higher. In these ways, formal learning contexts may favour the more privileged learners.

***Non-formal Learning Contexts***

Non-formal learning contexts aimed at older adults encompass systematic, organized education activities carried out outside a formal education structure (Findsen, 2006). These activities are expansive

in topic of interest (e.g. books clubs, dance lessons) and setting (e.g. community centres, private homes). Non-formal contexts share a similar objective of intentional learning and can be more accessible in approach and location than formal institutions. In Sweden, for example, education has long been viewed as a crucial driver for social change and their system is built on principles of accessibility, diversity and inclusiveness (Aberg, 2016). One Swedish program is 'Study Circles', which are small study groups with variable interests. Study Circles can be self-initiated by groups of individuals with a common interest or can be organized and offered by study associations. Aberg used participant responses to national surveys on the influence of non-formal learning Study Circles on self-perceptions of well-being. While participants expressed that the Circles increased their knowledge and skills, the sense of community was both a primary motivation and outcome of participation. More locally, Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia is home to Helping Hands, a community based 'seniors-helping-seniors' program (Hagarty, 2015). This peer-support program is situated in a small town that is both home to a high population of older adults and lacking a public transit system—a context similar to many small towns. The mission of the Helping Hands program is peer support with simple household tasks, with the goal of facilitating older adults to remain in their homes for as long as possible. Hagarty found that companionship was a defining experience for both the recipients and volunteers of the program.

In 2013, Anna Goulding led research of older adults' experiences with lifelong learning through visiting contemporary English art galleries. A series of three visits included a guided tour, a refreshment break, and a facilitated discussion of the art collection. The 43 participants reported through interviews how the art inspired different perspectives and debate and triggered reflection on their own lives and experiences. They said the visits improved their well-being through interaction with others, especially for those who faced challenges with mobility and loneliness.

In 2018, Narasimha et al. published results of a survey of 416 older adults participating in non-formal, general-interest courses in a public continuing education program in Canada. The authors report

that participation is positively associated with their psychological well-being, and that continuous participation may help older adults preserve their reserve capacities and assist them in feeling autonomous and self-fulfilled. Taken together, this collection of survey and interview data show that non-formal learning contexts can be accessible, interactive, and empowering to the individual and can enhance feelings of self-confidence and fulfillment.

***Informal Learning Contexts***

Informal learning happens during typical, day-to-day activities. As such, informal learning happens in countless contexts. Informal learning can be a more accessible and valuable option for older adults because it can accommodate a range of experiences and interests.

Given the expansiveness of contexts, Schugurensky (2000) categorized the intentionality and awareness of informal learning as it occurs. He describes three dimensions of informal learning as: self-directed learning (intentional and conscious), incidental learning (unintentional and conscious), and socialization (unintentional and unconscious). Volunteerism is a viable setting for each of these three dimensions of learning, but the work of Kimberley et al. (2016) highlights the importance of socialization. Kimberley et al. propose a concept of 'knowhow' for successful aging, which is most effectively enhanced through social contact with family, friends, and social networks. The authors assert that adults do not simply acquire knowledge, but co-create it through a dialogic process generated through their social networks. Informal learning contexts allow learners to jointly reflect and test their understanding with others, thereby co-creating knowledge. Due to the very nature of expansive yet typical day-to-day contexts, informal learning activities can be difficult to recognize. As this informal context can be accessible and valuable to older adults it must be deeply explored in order to make visible the learning that can occur in even the most mundane tasks.

**Volunteerism as a Non-formal and Informal Learning Context for Older Adults**

There is not one universally used definition of volunteerism. Duguid et al. (2013) describe four criteria of a volunteer activity: freely chosen, unpaid, part of an organization, and benefit to the community. Chen (2016b) proposes a similar description of volunteerism, but emphasizes the role of learning, saying that volunteerism is a freely offered activity that has basic qualities of a role or title, a type of leisure, altruism, and increasingly as a process for learning. Indeed, volunteerism is an engaging and flexible informal context for older adult learners. Yamashita (2017) describes how volunteering is a particularly relevant context for older adults to engage with learning and that the learning can be training from others, self-directed, or incidental through interactions with others. Authors Chen et. al (2016a) emphasize the importance of incidental learning. They assert that volunteer efforts of older adults are underestimated because studies mainly focus on formal volunteer efforts (through an organization) and less so on informal and non-formal efforts that include assistance with community, friends, and family. Under their comprehensive views of volunteering and learning, the authors interviewed older men about the potential benefits of volunteerism. The research participants said that volunteering offers beneficial characteristics of no to low cost, catering to a wide variety of interests, practical topics, flexible timeframes, and various methods of learning, notably that do not require memorization.

**Conceptualizing Successful Aging through Volunteerism**

Several authors have expanded on concepts of lifelong learning through volunteerism to show how learning in this context can contribute to aging well. Over the past 20 years, Miya Narushima has made significant contributions to the field of research on volunteerism among older adults. In her early work, Narushima (2001) explored experiences of older Canadian volunteers and found that community volunteering functions in three ways: (1) as a self-help mechanism, (2) as a form of later life learning, and (3) as a precondition for social transformation. She explains that learning facilitates a self-help

mechanism used for coping and adapting with problems that can arise with aging. Holistic, collaborative, and interactive learning, all achieved through volunteering, can help older adults retain their adaptive capability and enhance their personal growth. In a later publication of qualitative data gathered through individual interviews, Narushima (2005) further explains self-help and transformative mechanisms embedded in community volunteering. She describes community volunteering as a context that forces the volunteer to problem-solve, compromise and work together with others who have different backgrounds, perspectives, and approaches. She compares these inner conflicts of volunteering to the 'disorienting dilemma' conceived by Jack Mezirow, where an unexpected situation causes an individual to rethink something that they had taken for granted as true (St. Clair, 2015). The subsequent transformative learning process sparked by this disorienting dilemma forces a learner to examine their own assumptions, explore and test alternative options, and ultimately integrate new knowledge into their lives (Mezirow, 2009). Mezirow describes this transformational learning as, "transform[ing] problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2009 pg. 22). In keeping with Mezirow's theory, Narushima concludes from her 2005 study that volunteering transforms older adults into more active and committed community members driven to participate in community development.

Where Narushima's work explored personal growth and transformation of older adult volunteers, Chong et al. (2013) focused on engagement with others. Through a large, random household survey of adults in Hong Kong, the authors found that the subset of older adults aged 60 and above were motivated to volunteer by concerns with society and their self-esteem. These older adults responded that participation in voluntary work was associated with three positive aging outcomes: good health, caring engagement with significant others, and productive engagement in the community. Also exploring perceptions of aging, as part of a longitudinal study of aging, Liu et al. (2020) conducted a large survey of older adult volunteers in Hong Kong and correlated volunteerism with attitudes towards aging.

They found that volunteer service not only improves older people's self-assessed physical and mental health, but also improves their positive attitudes toward aging. Villar et al. (2020) similarly conducted a survey, this one focused on learning outcomes associated with different activities. Respondents' self-perceptions of skills gained through volunteerism included learning about others and themselves. Learning about others included direct interpersonal skills and conceptual understanding of society, and self-focused learning included instrumental skills and knowing oneself.

***The Experience of Successful Aging through Volunteerism***

In contrast to large scale surveys correlating combinations of volunteerism, learning, and successful aging, several authors have used focus groups or interviews to explore the experience of volunteering. In 2008, Duay and Bryan interviewed older adults about their perceptions of successful aging and how lifelong learning impacts their ability to adapt to changes and loss in their later years. Participants identified engagement with others as the most significant contributor to their successful aging and described the feelings of satisfaction through helping others and the community. In 2006, Warburton and McLaughlin held focus groups with older men and women together in Australia, exploring meanings that people attribute to their informal volunteer roles. Their paper presents exclusively the perceptions from the women in the group, who said that informal volunteering contributes to the women's identity and gives their lives meaning. They described how volunteering contributes to their self-esteem, ability to adapt with change, provides a social network and a source for external acknowledgements, and fosters learning and personal development.

Several publications have subsequently explored lived experiences of individual volunteers. Of note, Chen (2016b) collected narrative data from 31 older adult participants about the role of learning through volunteering within a self-defined concept of successful aging. Through individual interviews, Chen concluded that learning for successful aging is a holistic approach that includes physical, psychological, social and spiritual dimensions. Learning through volunteering benefited the participants'

self-defined vision of successful aging by establishing a substantial and expanding life, building and improving relationships, enhancing positive changes and self-evaluation, promoting physical and psychological health, and triggering treasures (in other words, coming to recognize their relative good fortune compared to those worse off) and preparations for the rest of life. Lee (2016) used focus groups of 93 older adults participating in service-learning groups to explore the outcomes of learning through volunteerism. Themed responses of outcomes included better health (including, notably, a more optimistic view of subsequent aging), improved confidence, learned gratitude, and finding self-worth and meaning in life. In 2019, Jones and Reynolds interviewed 6 people about their experience volunteering at a charity shop. The authors describe how volunteering contributes to a positive perception of aging as adults navigate challenging transitions such as bereavement and the cessation of work. Participants expressed how they engage with volunteering through their own agency in pursuit of active well-being. The authors presented and explored themes of how volunteering provides a sense of productivity, fulfillment, and belonging.

**Recognition of Previous Work and the Focus of the Proposed Research**

Previous research presented here shows the progression away from perceptions of aging that solely focus on preservation of physical and mental faculties and increasingly consider opportunities for growth. A growth-focused view of successful aging is predicated on lifelong learning. This previous research shows a similar shift to a more inclusive definition of lifelong learning. I will build on the work of others by recognizing that perceptions of successful aging are increasingly holistic, encompassing traditional measures of physical and mental health, but also relationships with others, engagement and growth, and perceptions of self-esteem. In approaching discussions with participants, I recognized Vaillant and Mukamal's (2001) assertion that successful aging should consider not just decline but change and development. I also recognized Baltes and Carstensen's (1999) process-oriented definition

with incorporation of goals, suggesting that successful aging may look different to individuals, depending on their subjective standards and norms.

I also approached this work with an inclusive definition of lifelong learning. Topics of discussion were framed on the pillars of learning, as conceptualized by Guo and Shan: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. In that way, the participants and I explored topics of learning as an individual endeavour for personal fulfillment but also as a collective experience. As we explored topics, I framed questions in alignment with Kimberley et al.'s concept of 'knowhow'. This concept grounded discussions of learning around tangible experiences, rather than theoretical perceptions. Kimberley et al.'s work also previously established volunteerism as a valued context for acquiring 'knowhow'.

Volunteerism certainly accommodates formal learning opportunities; however, it is an ideal context to explore non-formal and informal learning. As other authors have previously discussed, older adults prefer to engage in learning when it is flexible, accessible, and explores a topic where they have already established some knowledge or interest. I approached this work with a broad view of volunteerism, namely that it is a freely chosen endeavour that is unpaid and has benefit to the community. Given this broad view, the women in the study had a variety of volunteer roles that allowed them to engage with learning through purposeful instruction, self-direction, and interaction with others.

## Chapter 3: Study Methodology

The lived experience of older women who volunteer is not my own. This study is thus anchored in my own values, assumptions, and beliefs about the experience. My perspective shapes the research question and the chosen methodology to explore the results.

### Self-Reflection of Values, Biases, and Assumptions

My values are apparent throughout all stages of this research. First, I am dedicated to the pursuit of lifelong learning and learning for personal fulfillment. I also value community engagement. I appreciate the contributions that volunteers make to communities, and I also perceive great opportunities for benefits to the volunteer. I also place great value on the emerging growth-focused concept of 'successful aging', and recognize that individuals may view success in different ways.

Connected to my values, this research is reflective of my biases within the field of lifelong learning. I am biased to believe that learning endeavours among adults are too often aimed at younger adults and considered in an employment context, for example employees learning to adapt to new technologies and processes within the workplace, or learning with the objective of career advancement. I believe that more attention needs to be paid to lifelong learning outside the confine of work, learning for development of the self and pursing one's passions. I also believe that the learning pursuits of adult women are underrepresented in research, and that older adult women are particularly overlooked.

This specific research topic was born from my own biases about the lived experiences of older women. I am biased to think that women take on the majority of caretaking roles within families, caring for children, partners, and aging parents. I believe the caretaking role, combined with employment and other responsibilities can hamper women from pursuing endeavours for their own interest and well-being. Major assumptions I made with this research, focusing on women age 65 and older, were that their caretaking role was lessened, their participation in the workforce was reduced, and they had more time to explore deeply their own interests through volunteering.

Several of my own assumptions also informed the methods used in this research. First, I assumed that lifelong learning is a shared value among the women and would be an appropriate topic of discussion. Second, I assumed that volunteering was an appropriate context for learning. Third, I assumed that women would recognize opportunities to learn in their volunteer role, but that engagement with learning may not be a conscious choice or a motivation. As such, I provided information to the participants about topics of exploration in advance of our meeting to allow more time for reflection. Finally, the decision to incorporate arts was also under the assumption that volunteering may mean more to the women than they could express with words alone, and that choosing an object that represents their role would be an understood and acceptable request.

***Liberal Feminist Perspective***

I approached this research from a liberal feminist perspective. Liberal feminism asserts that women are equal to men, and must be treated so. Liberal feminists strive against political and economic inequities by raising awareness of the oppression of women (Garner, 1999). Liberal feminism, and feminism more broadly, seeks to increase women's self-esteem by supporting their empowerment and their active participation in decision-making and social action, and by encouraging society to recognize the intrinsic value and worth of women (Garner, 1999). These concepts of self-esteem, active participation, empowerment, and recognition of contributions are all cornerstones to this research, as topics explored with the participants.

Similar to my perception that lifelong learning focuses too heavily on workplace learning and learning among working-age individuals, much of the feminist literature has focused on younger women's experiences with reproduction and child rearing and employment equity (Garner, 1998). Less attention has been paid to issues facing older women. Feminist Age Theory has been emerging since the 1980s, asserting that issues of sexism and ageism are so intrinsically linked that gerontology cannot be studied in a gender-neutral context (Browne, 1998). Feminist age theorists recognize that women suffer

more from poverty, political discrimination, and gender-specific health concerns, and so social programs and policies must be designed with an equity lens (Browne, 1998). I consider the experience of older women who volunteer with this same lens. It is considering these gendered issues of health, independence, and social supports that I explored the volunteer experience and volunteerism as a context for learning. Similar to Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2009) perception of aging that focuses on growth, a perception that I share, feminist age theorists shun a degenerative view of aging that centres on an optimal youth. This viewpoint supports discussions of learning, adaptation to new realities, and growth.

***A Humanist Perspective***

I approach this work with a humanistic perspective. A humanistic perspective recognizes individuals as holistic beings in search of self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). I identify with this approach as a learner myself and as it relates to the pursuit of lifelong learning. A humanistic perspective views learning as subjective, self-motivated, and cooperative. St. Clair (2015, p.12) describes a humanist perspective as "chiefly concerned with the development of the person, with great importance placed on respecting and supporting people involved with education." Rather than a teacher-student dichotomy, the role of the educator is to facilitate development and growth of the individual. Among his descriptions of adult education philosophies in an environmental context, Pierre Walter describes a humanistic perspective of learning as holistic, subjective, and taking place in groups through cooperation. Holistically, the purpose of learning is development of the entire self—socially, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. Humanists believe that learners are complex, autonomous beings with an inherent sense of freedom and dignity, that they are internally motivated, self-directed, and have unlimited potential (Walter, 2009). A volunteer context aligns well with this view of learning, where individuals can autonomously engage with learning and often learn from each other.

A predominant humanistic theory is Abraham Maslow's theory of motivation, where he proposes a hierarchy of needs that progresses from basic human physiological needs to safety to belonging to esteem and ultimately to self-actualization (1943). Maslow's theory has a holistic view of the learner that encompasses physical, social, emotional, and intellectual needs. The theory similarly considers holistic goals of learning that include discovery of one's destiny and sense of values, sense of accomplishment, and acquisition of peak experiences (1970). Experience is central to Maslow's study of human learning and behaviour.

A humanistic perspective can be challenged as elitist as individuals who struggle to meet basic physical needs are theoretically hindered from achieving self-actualization. While discussions with participants did not explicitly include mention of Maslow's theory, as part of this exploration, I reflected on whether Maslow's hierarchy resonates with the women's experiences with volunteering. I considered whether volunteer activities are in pursuit of higher levels of self-actualization or if the experience fulfills basic needs or feelings of safety, belonging, or self-esteem. Indeed, I reflected on whether the experience of volunteering fulfills different needs for different women, or if it can fulfill multiple layers on the hierarchy of needs, simultaneously.

**Methodology**

The purpose of this research was to explore older women's lived experience with volunteering, and to explore volunteering as a context for lifelong learning and how this contributes to their perceptions of successful aging. To explore lived experience, I followed methodology guided by Max Van Manen's (1990, 2016) Phenomenological Inquiry. Explorations were largely verbal and followed a semi-structured interview design. The semi-structured design facilitated conversation with tailored follow-up questions, rather than a question-answer dialogue. This conversational tone aimed to make the participant feel more at ease and to recognize that the exploration of each woman's experience would be unique and not necessarily follow a prescriptive set of pre-determined questions. Explorations also

incorporated arts-based methods. During the interview, women presented objects that were meaningful to their volunteer experience. The objects were discussed and both discussion and photos of the object were subsequently included in analysis.

***Phenomenological Inquiry***

Phenomenology is the study of lived experiences. As described by Max Van Manen (1990), phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences. Phenomenological inquiry is, therefore, a particularly valuable approach to make ordinary experiences that are routine and often overlooked, more visible. In the context of volunteerism, for example, participants may easily identify themselves as volunteers, but they may have never considered what it means to be a volunteer or the significance that volunteering plays in their life. As Van Manen explains, "common experiences [such as volunteering] require phenomenological attentiveness precisely because they are so common and unremarkable" (2016, p.49). The same could be said for learning. While people may easily recognize intentional learning activities, considering the unintentional and informal learning that may come with volunteering may require more attention.

As theorized by Van Manen (2016), the purpose of phenomenology is not to offer proof or explanations. It instead "offers the possibility of insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world" (p.9). Phenomenology seeks to explore a lived experience and should be explored in such a way that reveals the nature and significance of the experience. Van Manen further explains that phenomenological research is characterized as systematic (using practiced models of questioning and reflecting), explicit (attempting to articulate through context and form of text), self-critical (continually examining its own goals, methods, strengths, and shortcomings), and intersubjective (needing dialogue and validation).

According to Van Manen (2016), phenomenological inquiry provides both concrete portrayals of the lived experience and offers insightful reflections on the meaning of those experiences.

Phenomenological methodology requires a researcher to investigate experience as it is lived (rather than conceptualized), reflect on essential themes, describe the phenomena through the art of writing and re-writing, maintain a commitment to the phenomenon and pedagogical relation to the phenomenon, and continuously balance the parts and whole of the research content (Van Manen, 2016). The researcher explores with participants an experience with the intention of uncovering deeper significance. The exploration aims to reveal experiences that are distinct to the individual but also salient or relatable to others.

Phenomenology is retrospective inquiry in that it presupposes that lived experiences cannot be fully grasped as the experience occurs. Lived experiences gather significance as they are reflected upon and given memory to. For example, volunteers are conscious of their volunteering as a presence or activity; however, it is upon reflection that volunteers recognize what it means to be a volunteer. The concepts of lived experience and reflection mean that consciousness and understanding are constantly evolving. A phenomenological inquiry is, therefore, never complete and so there is no consideration for 'sample size' or 'saturation'. Rather than striving for completeness, phenomenology seeks to describe the lived quality and significance of an experience in a fuller and deeper way. A good phenomenological description provides portrayals of lived experience and offers insightful reflections on the meanings of those experiences (Van Manen, 2016).

Language is a critical component of the phenomenological exploration of lived experience in the reflection, conversations, and written description of the essence. As such, lived experiences are often gathered from others through verbal discourse, as in the form of interviews for exploring personal life stories; however, verbal discourse can be enhanced with other media. Artistic material, for example, is also commonly used for phenomenology and each artistic medium (painting, sculpture, music) has its own language of expression. Objects of art are visual, tactile, auditory, kinetic texts consisting of non-verbal language (Van Manen, 1990).

***Incorporating the Arts***

Arts-informed research is a mode and form of qualitative research that is influenced by the arts (Cole and Knowles, 2008). The central purposes of arts-informed research are to "enhance understanding of the complexities of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry, and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible" (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 59). Arts-informed research reflects a large variety of art genres (such as performance, writing, painting, photography, collage and installation art) and these genres can be used in varying ways of data collection, analysis, interpretation and representation (Van der Vaart et al., 2018). In that way, an arts-based or arts-informed approach is predicated on the belief that a phenomenon can be explored, re-storied, and understood further using artistic approaches beyond the written word, with the aim of engaging diverse audiences (Kukkonen & Bolden, 2018).

Summarized from Cole and Knowles (2008), arts-informed research has several defining elements: Commitment to particular art form(s), methodological integrity for integrating the particular art form to achieve the research purposes, creative inquiry that responds to the natural flow of events and experiences, the presence of the researcher's reflexivity and artistry (yet these are not the focus of study), intention to reach the audience with the artistic form and for the audience to engage. In the context of arts-informed research, creative inquiry is to know and follow methodology but not be bound by it.

Arts-informed research seeks to engage individuals in the creation of knowledge in a way that is accessible, evocative, embodied, empathetic, and provocative. The research considers the multi-dimensionality of individuals including the physical, emotional, spiritual, social, cultural and the multi-dimensionality of ways that individuals engage with the world, including oral, literal, visual, and embodied (Cole & Knowles, 2008). Arts-informed methods can be useful to overcome power imbalances

between the researcher and participants, can be flexibly applied in a variety of contexts, and can bridge between generations, cultures, and socioeconomic classes (Van der Vaart et al., 2018).

***Incorporating Objects into Exploration with Participants***

This research incorporates the use of physical objects. Berihun et al. (2015) published significant work around the use of physical objects in arts-informed research. As part of a larger study on how youth heal from violence, the authors invited members of a research advisory group to bring and collectively analyze two objects: one symbolizing violence and the other, healing. Defining an "object" as anything we can indicate, point out, refer to, and relate to, they explain that objects can be symbolic in that they represent something to individuals beyond their being in our imagination. In that way we use objects to represent other things, people, social phenomena, ideas, ideals, and ideology. They describe that physical objects provide visible sites where invisible discourses and subtle social structures are played out in the interpretive processes of meaning-making.

Nicole Brown (2019) also explored objects– 'identity boxes', more specifically–as a data collection method. Participants were asked to respond to questions around lived experience with fibromyalgia using objects to represent their answers. The purpose of identity boxes was to provide participants with a means to focus their thoughts, deepen their reflections and express their experiences more easily. Once all photos and explanations were gathered, Brown conducted preliminary analyses and met with the group collectively via video-conference call to interpret meaning. As a subsequent form of data analysis, Brown used the identity boxes to create an artistic installation.

For this research, I used physical objects to enhance narrative description during data collection. From a phenomenological perspective, the objects helped to make meaning of the women's lived experience and allowed for deeper exploration of insights that are difficult to put into words. Asking the participants to bring physical objects enabled the women to shape the discussion through their chosen objects. Using objects also reduced power imbalances. By informing the women ahead of time that I was

seeking to incorporate physical objects, they had an opportunity to reflect on their experiences before our discussion. From a pragmatic perspective, physical objects helped to build rapport and create a sense of ease at the beginning of our discussion.

***Incorporating Collage into Exploration of Themes***

As a second incorporation of art, I used collage as a method of analysis, to interpret the composite essence of the experience of volunteerism among older adults. As Butler-Kisber describes in Knowles and Cole (2008), collage can contribute to qualitative research in several ways such as inquiry, reflection, and conceptualizing a response to a research question. I used collage as a method of deepening understanding and generating themes among experiences explored with participants.

As explained by Butler-Kisber (2008), in writing research, a researcher delineates ideas and then finds the words and expressions of these ideas to get at the nuances and more embodied ways of representing the ideas. Collage, on the contrary, "allows the researcher to move from intuition and feelings to thoughts and ideas. Image fragments are chosen and placed to give a sense of something rather than a literal expression of the idea. This process honours the unconnected and inexplicable" (Butler-Kisber, 2008; p.269). Collage stimulates visual thinking and offers the opportunity to express experiences as holistic, non-linear metaphors (Culshaw, 2019). Exploring the holistic experience is a significant intention of this work. Also important to a humanistic perspective, collage honours the equality of each individual's experience, in other words, that no individual's experience is more important than another. Collage is particularly appropriate for this research as it facilitates flexibility and multi-dimensionality, can include images ranging from concrete to abstract, and allows positioning and re-positioning as the themes are explored.

**Research Design**

I used qualitative methods in keeping with a phenomenological approach to explore, assemble, and analyze the experience of older women who volunteer. Through individual interviews I aimed to discuss ten topics with participants under broad questions around:

1) The overall experience of volunteering
2) Engaging with learning through volunteer activities
3) The connection between volunteerism and successful aging

After interviews were complete and data was analyzed, I held a group meeting with all participants. The objective of the meeting was to present the themes back to participants, asking if the themes resonated with them. I invited discussion of each theme and incorporated additional insights gained through these discussions into my analyses.

I obtained approval from the Mount Saint Vincent University Research Ethics Board on May 6, 2022. To connect with women who may be interested to participate in the study, I contacted local organizations that I thought would likely appeal to older women volunteers. I compiled a list of organizations through on-line searches and recommendations. I contacted a representative of each organization through email and asked that they either share my information flyer with their volunteers through their email list or post the flyer in an area where their volunteers could see it. Not wanting to turn away interested participants, I approached organizations one at a time. ElderDog Canada, Mission Mart, Grandmothers for Grandmothers, the Stanfield International Airport, and VON (Victorian Order of Nurses) all agreed to share my information with their volunteers. At least one volunteer participated from each organization I contacted; however, many of the women I spoke with volunteered with multiple organizations among this list and others I had not reached out to.

On the information flyer, I expressed an interest in speaking with women about their experiences with volunteering and how they think volunteering benefits them. I asked women to

contact me if they were 65 years and older and volunteered with an organization for at least one year out of the last three years, for one hour per week. My intent with the timeframe was to ensure that experiences were salient to the women, while recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted their ability to volunteer, either because the volunteer organization was forced to close, or because the volunteer made the choice to pause their engagement.

For conciseness, the concept of incorporating an object was not included on the information flyer. It was first presented when potential participants approached by phone to discuss the study. During that discussion, as part of explaining the study, I asked each woman to bring an object that represents their volunteer work. As to not influence their choice of object, I answered all questions each participant had about the object, but provided little direction and no examples. I did advise that I would ask to discuss the object and its meaning and that I would like to take a photo of the object, to be included in the written thesis. I asked permission to send an electronic copy of the consent form to each participant immediately following the phone call. I asked the individuals to read the consent form before our meeting. In that way, they would have the written information about the object and a reminder of the request. The day before our scheduled interview, I emailed each woman to confirm the meeting, remind about the object, and invite any questions.

***Individual Interviews***

Six women contacted me to express interest in the study. The women each self-disclosed that they met inclusion criteria of: being 65 years old or older and volunteering for at least one hour per week for 1 year or longer. All six signed a consent form and went on to an individual interview.

Each meeting began by seeking informed consent from the participant. As part of the discussion of privacy and confidentiality, I informed participants that preserving complete anonymity was not possible if participants chose to attend the later group meeting where compiled themes would be presented back to participants. As another way to protect privacy, I offered that the women could use a

pseudonym for the interview and subsequent group meeting. Three women chose to use a pseudonym for identification in the interviews (but subsequently offered their true name at the group interview). Immediately following informed consent, I asked permission to begin recording.

The interview began with an invitation for the participant to show her object and share why she chose it and the significance it has to her volunteer experience. From there, interviews progressed through subjects of the volunteer experience (e.g., motivation to volunteer, engagement with others), lifelong learning through volunteerism (e.g., skills or learning about oneself) and the connection between volunteerism, lifelong learning, and successful aging (e.g., goals of successful aging, how volunteering contributes to successful aging). Those three discussion topics were consistently in that order, while specific questions under each discussion topic varied, as to not disrupt the flow of conversation. Interviews lasted between 45 and 125 minutes.

At the conclusion of the interview, I asked permission to photograph the object. I invited participants to reflect further on our conversation, and to contact me if they had additional information to share, either before or after receiving the transcript. I informed participants that I would contact them within fourteen days with a transcript of the recording. The participants were invited to read the transcript and provide corrections or clarification. Given the priority to return transcripts as quickly as possible, my analysis approach was to transcribe interviews in the order they occurred, spacing interviews two to three weeks apart.

**Data Analysis Strategy**

My data analysis strategy was to reflect on both transcripts and digital images of objects, constructing themes around three topics:

1) The overall experience of volunteering
2) Engaging with learning through volunteer activities
3) The connection between volunteerism and successful aging

Phenomenological inquiry guides the researcher to immerse themself in the data. The process is iterative, where the researcher gains deeper insight as they re-explore the data. I began this iterative process immediately with the initial interview. Following phenomenological methodology, explorations should provide concrete portrayals of lived experience and insightful reflections on the meanings of those experiences. As such, immediately following each interview I would reflect on the conversation and note my general impressions of the meeting.

In keeping with phenomenological methodology, I did not have a pre-determined sample size. Instead, as interviews progressed, I carefully considered if the volunteer experience could be explored more deeply by insights gained through an additional interview. After each interview, I reflected on the conversation and noted initial impressions. After each of the first four interviews, I was confident that I had not fully explored the experience. I added a fifth interview and, after that fifth interview, I decided that deeper exploration was still needed with someone who had experience volunteering directly with clients. I therefore specifically called on VON as I knew the organization offered diverse opportunities for a volunteer to engage directly with clients. From that contact, I was able to arrange my sixth interview. After reflecting on the sixth interview, I decided that I could fully explore the experience of volunteerism and ended the interview process.

**Transcription of Recordings**

My first step in data analysis was transcription of interviews. Transcribing was an important exercise in the analysis process as it allowed an immediate opportunity to familiarize myself with the data. Each transcript was completed over multiple sessions. Once complete, I reviewed the transcript one time in tandem with listening to the recording for accuracy before returning it to the participant. All transcripts were returned to the participant within fourteen days of recording.

I aimed to get transcripts to participants as quickly as possible so they could more easily recall conversations. I asked participants to note any gaps they perceived in our conversation, specifically

regarding important questions that I failed to ask or additional information they would like to provide. I offered a second meeting with each participant, in person or via telephone, if they chose to provide additional insight. All six participants reviewed their transcript. No one requested an additional meeting or to add information. One participant emailed with points of clarification around place names and dates she had recalled after the interview and another participant requested via telephone to have a segment of conversation deleted from the transcript as she felt it revealed sensitive information about a loved one. After revising these two transcripts, I read each of the six transcripts twice while listening to the recording to note verbal nuances such as tone, inflection, and emotion. After this point, I considered the transcripts to be complete and deleted recordings.

***Data Management***

For participant transcripts, I did not use qualitative data analysis software. This was largely due to the fact that I would not be sharing transcripts for analysis. Instead, I used a combination of word processing (Microsoft Word) and spreadsheet (Microsoft Excel) software and a reflective journal. I saved each transcript as an editable Microsoft Word file to highlight important quotes and make notes of emerging themes. I saved electronic files of photographed objects. Three of the women brought a single object to the interview, as had been requested. Two women brought two objects, which I photographed separately. The sixth woman brought several objects, each representing a different volunteer role. These objects of the sixth woman were captured in one single photograph.

I collated reflections that I made on electronic files and in my journal into one spreadsheet. I used the spreadsheet to organize themes and subthemes supported by insights (quotes) provided by participants. I saved each iterative file by version date to protect information and allow for the re-exploration of previous ideas. I collated object data, which included photographed objects and transcribed discussion of each object. I reflected on these objects and explored their meaning in my

reflective journal. These reflections were incorporated into the electronic spreadsheet of explored themes.

***Data Analysis***

I first reflected on each woman's transcript in sequence of interview. The first phase of analysis happened in tandem with data collection. After interviewing each woman, I sought to make meaning of her individual experience by reflecting on the interview and highlighting powerful and descriptive quotes directly on the transcript. In my reflective journal, I noted potential themes that emerged from the woman's experiences and the meaning behind her chosen object.

Beginning with the first interview, I organized potential themes onto three spreadsheets of the overall volunteer experience, engagement with learning through volunteerism, and the connection between volunteering and successful aging. As interviews progressed, I incorporated new themes and evaluated existing themes. Constant re-evaluation was critical, as some themes that seemed initially prevalent did not resonate with all women, and other themes became more prevalent and significant as the exploration deepened.

My approach to developing themes was consistent with phenomenological methodology that centres on deep exploration rather than saturation or completeness. As such, I did not have pre-set criteria of what would constitute a theme (such as number of times referenced), nor did I require that the theme had to be expressed by each woman. Some themes were indeed significant to each woman's experience (for instance, that volunteering provides a sense of purpose), where other themes were prevalent among a subset of the women, but that theme was crucial to their experience. The first half of interviews happened in close sequence. Themes emerged and evolved with each interview. The latter half of interviews were more protracted, with more consideration paid to whether themes were fully explored, or would be enhanced by additional perspectives.

Themes were generated and presented back to participants as a group in May 2023. Five of the six women were able to attend the group meeting. The sixth woman was traveling for an extended period and offered to provide feedback on the generated themes via email rather than delay the group meeting. The group meeting was not recorded, but I took detailed notes of discussion that added to the exploration of themes. All participants were in agreement with presented themes.

## Chapter 4: Participants

The six women ranged in ages between 70 and 80. Interviews were held between September 2022 and January 2023. I offered each woman the option of a virtual or in-person meeting. All six opted for an in-person meeting. Four interviews took place at a public location, such as a coffee shop of the participant's choosing, and two participants invited me to their home. All interviews lasted between 45 and 125 minutes. In order I met with Trilby, Anne, Louise, Helga, Nancy, and Sherry.

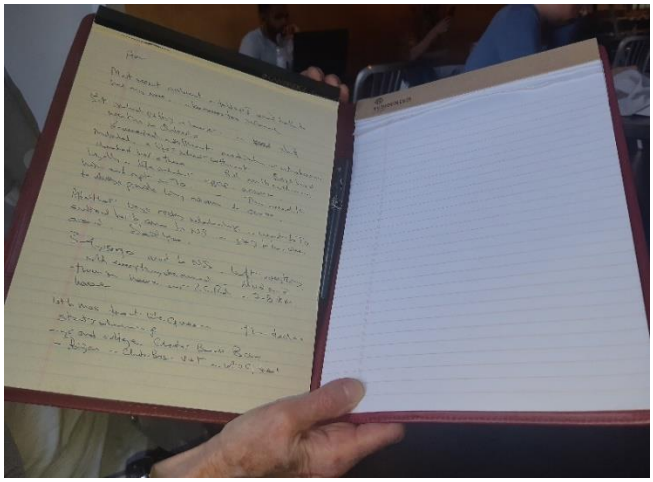
### Trilby

Trilby is a journalist. Likely due to both her profession and her generous spirit, she was thoughtful with each of my questions, periodically asking if I was getting the information I was seeking. We met on a Friday and a hurricane was approaching that weekend. That day she was checking on a client to make sure she had food and other supplies for the storm.

Trilby came in carrying her object. It was a red journal that she says, "*bridges all of her worlds*".

**Figure 1**

*Trilby's Notebook*



Trilby feels in flux with her volunteer roles, but that journal holds stead. She currently volunteers with ElderDog and has been for about seven years. ElderDog is an organization grounded in the connection between humans and animals, including the significant impact that companion animals make on the

lives of older adults. Through ElderDog, volunteers provide a variety of services aimed at caring for dogs, easing the caretaking burden on older adults so that their animal companions may remain with them for as long as possible. Trilby speaks of her role walking dogs for clients. Around the same time she started with ElderDog, she also started volunteering with VON. VON provides physical care and social supports for older adults through at-home and community-based services. Trilby volunteered with the *Meals on Wheels* program, by collecting prepared meals from the VON office and distributing them to clients. She says with these two roles she was inspired to help older people do things they might have done in the past, but no longer could. She has great compassion for others and the loss of independence that can come with aging. In her journal she writes notes about clients and any situations she feels should be recorded. Both ElderDog and Meals on Wheels were deemed essential services and continued throughout the pandemic. The encounters with clients necessarily changed due to precautionary measures. Physical supplies, be they dog leashes or meals, were left on front steps to limit in-person interactions. Trilby felt troubled, especially with Meals on Wheels. She said she would worry that clients may forget their meals on the front step and the food would be wasted or consumed when they should not be. She says her role with Meals on Wheels came to a natural end in December 2021, after changes to the food distribution chain and her delivery route shrank.

Trilby says she feels drained. While open in our conversation, she appears quite introverted and confides that she is a loner by nature and needs lots of time to herself. She is incredibly introspective about her previous roles, albeit maybe too hard on herself, as she contemplates making a change. She feels that organizations benefit from "*new blood*" with fresh ideas and enthusiasm. She is not interested in Board work as it can be too political, and says she does not have the energy she once did for activism. She wistfully recollects her time volunteering as a librarian for a music library and preparing COVID-19 rapid test kits, where her work was largely independent but she felt the camaraderie of working with others for a common goal. Despite feeling unsettled and the heaviness of making a change, she looks

forward to spending time in retirement on endeavours that she had no time for when she was working. She says she is still looking for her next great passion. She wants to feel as if she has made a difference and is looking for something meaningful and not overloading.

**Anne**

Anne is a warm and lively woman, who was quick to laugh throughout our conversation. She is unique to the six women in this study in that she began volunteering after retiring from her career. She had worked in a bank for 40 years and balancing work and family prevented her from volunteer work. Like a physical expression of her career ending, she says she spent the first winter of her retirement decluttering her home. Anne recognizes her good fortune and thought she could have had a very comfortable life at home, but decided she needed new purpose.

Anne and her husband have a fondness for the airport, having gone in their earlier years to watch the planes come and go. They decided to volunteer together with the Stanfield International Airport's *Tartan Team*. Members of the Tartan Team are present at the Halifax-based airport every day from the early mornings to late evenings. The airport is the largest in Atlantic Canada. The Team assists with way-finding, but also recognizes the airport as a place where people are reunited, say good-bye, and pass through under numerous contexts with varying needs. As such, the team members identify as both a source of information and compassion for travelers. As her object, Anne shows me the tartan vest she wears as part of her uniform. She explains the pins that adorn the vest are all very meaningful to her, such as a flag from the country where her daughter currently lives, and one representing her home town.

**Figure 2**

*Anne's Tartan Team Vest*

She says the role is a great fit for her and her husband. They share transportation and have a shift together each week. Anne says the pandemic has taken a little of the joy out of volunteering at the airport. She says volunteers are no longer able to wander the airport as they previously did. Instead, they are encouraged to stay at a kiosk. They are also now reduced to two volunteers per shift—in her case, her and her husband—so she sees fewer other volunteers. She also notes that they have lost a lot of volunteers since the pandemic. She recognizes these changes and also the burden of travel to and from the airport, but she says it is still fulfilling enough for her to continue.

When I ask about other volunteer work, she lights up and begins speaking about Mission Mart. Mission Mart is a retail store that operates to support the Souls Harbour Rescue Mission. The Rescue Mission operates drop-in centres and shelters and provides meals and personal care items for impoverished people in Nova Scotia. Mission Mart sells donated clothes and household items and contributes the profits to the Souls Harbour Rescue Mission. Anne spends one afternoon per week sorting through bins of donated clothing. Where others have spoken about enjoying the social environment of volunteering, Anne *creates* it. She calls herself "*a recruiter*" and says that when she finds

something she loves to do, she brings people with her. At Mission Mart, she volunteers with her sister and a small group of friends. On the heels of Hallowe'en, Anne shows me photos of the group dressed up in costumes they had found during their shift. As Anne describes her role with Mission Mart, I can see that it is not all for the social aspect. She explains that they could be working along silently for hours, then something will spark a flurry of discussion and laughter, and then it's right back to work, sorting through big heavy bins of clothes.

Surely, I wonder, it must be a difficult, dirty job to sort through huge bins of donated clothes. When I ask what it is that keeps her going back she has a long pause, thinking of a genuine answer. "*Both Tartan Team and Mission Mart are very appreciative. There! I've found the answer! The motivator is the appreciation that you get. That's a very strong motivator*."

Despite Anne's vibrant personality, she took pause at many points during our conversation to reflect on my questions. Unlike others I spoke with who said they 'always volunteered' or that it was 'in their nature', Anne began volunteering later in life after a period of self-reflection and discovered this was a good purpose for her.

**Louise**

I met Louise about six weeks before Christmas. While we discussed a meeting time and place, Louise warned me that her schedule was busy this time of year, rehearsing for her choir's annual concert. During that discussion she also mentioned that she is "*not much of a talker*". I kept this in mind at our meeting, watching for cues that she might be growing weary of my questions. If she was, she never let it show.

When Louise arrives at our meeting place, she is carrying a large bag. I immediately get a glimpse into her diligence. She has brought an object for each of her volunteer roles and gives me a brief summary: she's with the airport Tartan Team, the Royal Nova Scotia International Tattoo choir, and another choir called Jubilate. She proudly tells me that the Jubilate Singers' Choir performs an annual

concert on the second Sunday of December, raising money for the foodbank. She has brought with her sheet music for Silent Night, which her group will perform in the upcoming concert and a can of food.

**Figure 3**

*Louise's Tattoo Shirt and Music, Jubilate Music and Food Donation, Tartan Team Vest, and Government of Canada Study Guide*


She then shifts her focus to the Tattoo. The Tattoo is an annual performance in Halifax of international military and civilian groups performing choral, band, and theatrical compositions. She has been with the Tattoo choir for over 25 years, although, she says, that is not nearly as long as many others. The choir practices intensively in May and June, including daily rehearsals in the final weeks. Louise tells me that each year they have about seven acts from around the world and her choir has to learn each country's national anthem in their native tongue. As her object, she has brought a t-shirt from an earlier performance along with the sheet music to the Jordanian national anthem. She has already heard that South Koreans plan to attend this coming summer for the first time. She plants to start studying the music soon so she is not surprised in May. She is also wondering whether the Swiss troop will be coming from the German or the French side, so she is preparing for both. This preparation is not out of anxiety; on the contrary she is very self-assured. She is very proud of the choir and the

Tattoo's 'world class entertainment'. When I ask what challenges her most, preparing for a performance of the Tattoo's magnitude she shrugs her shoulders and says, "*who will look after my dog*?" She admits that June is such a lovely month that each year she debates whether she will go back but, ultimately, each year she does. When I ask her about what keeps her coming back she responds with the plural, "*everybody loves it and we do it because it's a challenge, I guess*."

Louise volunteers with her husband on Thursday evenings with the Tartan Team. It was a practical decision for them to volunteer together, they were both looking for volunteer opportunities, they both love airports and airplanes, and this allows them to share transportation. Like the choir, she has considered ending her time there. The Team paused for the pandemic and that seemed like it could be a natural end. Also like the choir, her decision to remain has been collective. Having lived in Germany, she and her husband are fluent in German. When a German flight coincides with their shift, they often stay hours later assisting travelers in their native tongue. So far, this contribution is meaningful enough to keep them both there. In fact, when Louise shows me her tartan vest that she wears as part of her uniform, it is plain except for a pin representing her hours of service and a German flag.

When I ask about the toll that the long shifts at the airport and choir take on her she brushes it off saying, "*you know that you're going to be standing, so you wear comfortable shoes. And if you have to sit down, you sit down, and that's that*." Louise is direct and pragmatic throughout our conversation. I ask what motivates her to do this work and she asks back, "*why wouldn't I*?" She has no judgement for others who do not volunteer their time, but she wonders why they would pass up opportunities to make themselves and others feel good. She says she has always volunteered, always given back to the community. She recognizes her good health and relative privilege so she gives back what she can. But she is quick to say it does not necessarily have to be money; helping people, smiling at people, being kind to people, that is what counts. She muses that the only thing that would stop her from volunteering is if she went blind. But she quickly follows with, "*even if you're blind, I'm sure there's something you can*

*do*." Louise truly lives this philosophy. She and her husband will soon leave for Ecuador, as they typically do for the winter months. In Ecuador, she refers to a strong community of 'ex-pats' who volunteer with the local community. On a recent trip they came together to repair the roof of a community centre. But what she describes to me in great detail is graffiti. Once every week or so, she will seek out graffiti in her local area and paint over it.

Louise is proud of her volunteer work, but never seeks personal recognition. She sees the collective in all her efforts and the accomplishment of her team. She never mentions socialization as a motivator to her volunteering. Instead, she reflects on the camaraderie and working together for a common goal. As we close the interview, I am struck by her quiet commitment to others. I see that volunteering is not just what she does, but it is who she is. Indeed, as I collect photos of her objects, she is reminded of one more thing to tell me. From her bag she pulls a study guide published by the Government of Canada. She is helping to prepare an immigrant couple to write their citizenship exam. She pauses and shows me the dense workbook that she uses as a guide. After three years of working with the husband, he recently wrote his exam and passed it on the first try. Undaunted, she is now working with the wife but is prepared for a longer commitment, she has more household demands than the husband has, competing for her time.

**Helga**

I meet Helga in a crowded coffee shop, and she has brought me two gifts. The first is a container of brownies. The second, she reveals at the end of our meeting, is a pin from the Tartan Team. She has volunteered with the Tartan Team since 2000 and is the last remaining volunteer from the original team. The pin she gifts me is from the team's early years. She began volunteering with the Tartan Team after seeing an ad on the television. The ad asked: "Do you like to travel? Are you interested in volunteering at the airport?" At the time she thought it was worth a try, something that would get her out of the house. The rest, she says, is history.

Helga volunteers at the airport on Thursday mornings, starting at 5am. Her early start time is unique among the Tartan Team, and by her own choice. She enjoys that the quiet of the early morning allows her to spend more time with individual travelers. She says departures are busy at that time of day, but it is quiet with arrivals. This is a good thing for Helga, as she volunteers alone and recognizes that she cannot be in two places at once. She says, "*when people ask me what I do at the airport, I jokingly say, I tell people where to go and how to get there. But mainly that's what it is. People aren't sure where they have to go check in. They aren't sure of the signage*." She says that her shifts are too busy for much socializing, but quickly into our meeting I see that Helga makes fast and strong connections to people. She says she reads cues in travelers to see who needs her help. There are the cues that anyone in her role with the Tartan Team would notice, such as travelers still carrying luggage past the point of check in. But she also recounts how she'll observe a lone traveler who is reading a book. She knows the ones that put down their books after catching her eye likely need conversation. Helga is a self-proclaimed people-person.

When asked what has kept her committed to the airport for over 20 years she says, "*the rewards are greater than what you'd think they are*." She says what keeps her engaged is that no two days are the same and she would miss the people. The Tartan Team paused operations for 18 months starting in March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. When the team received an email asking if they would consider resuming services, Helga was eager to go back saying, "*I was probably the first one to answer back and say 'yes'*".

Helga is also very active with community choirs. She has directed a local men's choir since 2006. She describes the role as lots of fun and tells me about the friendships she has made. Where the Tartan Team is defined weekly shifts, her work with the choir is more consuming. In addition to the performances, she researches performance locations, organizes the travel and accommodations,

provides itineraries and packing lists to choir members. She has brought a notebook to show me as her object, which details every concert they participated in from 2007 to 2019.

**Figure 4**

*Helga's Notebook and Tartan Team Pin*

This notebook is full and so she is on to a second. She opens to a page and explains a line-up of the order the performers entered the stage. Along with the details, Helga always has items such as a sewing kit and granola bars to ensure performances go off without a hitch. She is the reliable backbone of the choir. The choir travels internationally and, for this, she sells baked goods to offset the costs. Helga says she is a lifelong volunteer. The daughter of two ministers, she was brought up to help others. She says it was engrained in her that she is part of a community and if you want to make the community better, you have to do something about it.

When we meet, Helga is at a crossroads. The choir is very fulfilling to her, but she is wanting more flexibility to spend more time with her husband and do her own travels. She has written a resignation letter, but so far has not been able to deliver it. When I ask what space she thinks that choir fills in her life she takes a long pause, "*I don't know. I haven't gone there yet. I just know I'd miss it*."

**Nancy**

Nancy received a flyer for the research project at a meeting of one of her volunteer groups, Grandmothers for Grandmothers. The group operates nationally under the Stephen Lewis Foundation to raise funds and awareness for grandmothers in Africa who are raising children orphaned by AIDS. She is heavily involved with Grandmothers for Grandmothers, currently acting as her local chapter's president. She also volunteers at the main distribution centre of Feed Nova Scotia. Feed Nova Scotia responds to the immediate need of food security in the province by collecting food donations and redistributing them to those in need throughout Nova Scotian community locations. They act with a social justice lens, advocating for systemic changes to housing, employment, and community services which impact food sovereignty and social equity.

As we settled into our table before the interview began Nancy said of the study advertisement, *"I wasn't sure how much of it [this interview] is about socializing, but it is a really important part for me*." In fact, Nancy brought two objects with her. As she describes, the first is a food packet, a tangible object to represent what she does at Feed Nova Scotia: checking the integrity of packaging and expiry dates before food is passed on to clients. The second object represents the socialization aspect. It is a badge that one of the men she volunteers with at Feed Nova Scotia made for her recent 80$^{th}$ birthday. Nancy laughs as she explains that the badge comes with conditions, first that the man is there to make the coffee, and second that he may need to be reminded.

**Figure 5**

*Nancy's Homemade Feed Nova Scotia Coffee Card and Food Donation*


Nancy does two shifts per week at the food bank and her colleagues from both shifts came together for a surprise birthday celebration. She says that the badge is a sign of their team spirit. She says the coffee breaks were so valued as a chance to connect with one another that during the COVID-19 pandemic when Feed Nova Scotia was closed to volunteers, one of the group members set up a zoom call at 10:00 every Thursday morning as if they were at coffee break. Nancy has been with the same volunteer shift at Feed Nova Scotia for 23 years. Three on the shift have been there for 20 years or more. She did not expect to become so close with the people she volunteers with. She says there is a strong sense of empathy in the group that ranges from age 64 to 85. They support each other through illness and loss, but also laugh a lot and share stories of children and grandchildren.

Nancy considers herself a lifelong volunteer and has instilled that in her children. She was out of the workforce for 12 years while her children were young. When she decided to seek out a full-time job, her new employer said, "looking at your volunteer history, you're probably working less when you're working full time." Nancy has continued that dedication throughout her life. In addition to her roles with Feed Nova Scotian and Grandmothers for Grandmothers, she is a member of a community choir. She values working alongside people who share her philosophy and outlook, and that they are all working

for a common goal. She says while the work can be tiring, when they come together she feels reinvigorated.

**Sherry**

Sherry invited me to her home to discuss her volunteer experiences. We meet in her living room, surrounded by windows that look out to a lake and dense trees. She jumps up a few times during our meeting to point out squirrels and to stoke the wood fire. I can see in our brief meeting that she constantly looks for the joy around her. Sherry begins by showing me her object. It is a pin that a client gave to her. Sherry delivers meals through VON's Meals on Wheels program. She describes a 'sweet older woman' who asks little favours of Sherry when she delivers meals, such as helping with a jar she cannot open. Sherry beams, recounting how the lady gave her the pin saying, "you just epitomize a volunteer."

**Figure 6**

*Sherry's Pin Received from a Client*


Sherry began volunteering with VON about 10 years ago. She had been a nurse and, while she never worked with VON, she knew of them and always admired their community outreach and ingenuity to serve others on very tight resources. Before delivering meals, she volunteered with the transportation program, driving clients to and from appointments. Sherry does not volunteer with the VON for the social interaction. She spends little time with the other volunteers. She collects the frozen meals from the distribution site and packs them in her car. She also spends little time with each of her

clients, hurrying between deliveries to keep the food cold. In a typical shift she would deliver to about 12 to 15 clients. Depending on her schedule, she would chat for about five minutes with clients. She always makes time to ask new clients if they enjoyed their meals. She is extremely proud of the mission of VON and Meals on Wheels and the quality of affordable food they provide.

While Sherry does not volunteer for the social aspect, she recognizes that many of her clients might highly value the social interactions they have with her. Sherry feels great empathy for the clients she serves. She says she encounters a lot of lonely people in her role and has seen some difficult living situations. Meals on Wheels operated throughout the pandemic and Sherry has noticed sharp declines in some clients. She credits her previous nursing experience as allowing her to identify these people to staff at VON, who she hopes will get them the care they need. Rather than feel burdened by the needs of her clients, she feels privileged that she is in the position to help.

Sherry has another volunteer role with Grandmothers to Grandmothers. She has been with that group for about 15 years, having joined with a friend of hers who also still volunteers. That volunteer role focuses on fundraising. Together the grandmothers organize events such as fabric sales, book sales, and dinners, all with the spirit of raising awareness of the impact that HIV/AIDS has had on the African continent and funds to support grandmothers raising their grandchildren whose parents have died from the disease. Contrary to her role with VON, Sherry speaks of camaraderie and close connections within that group, "*oh, we laugh so much, we have so much fun, and we learn*."

## Chapter 5: Themes

The construction of themes centred on digital images of the women's objects and their described experiences. Creating the collage of images was an iterative process, incorporating new images as I met with each participant. Once all images were collected, I arranged and re-arranged images, ensuring all were visible and could be reflected upon as I explored their collective experiences. After compiling themes, I arranged the collage into a final version that was shared with the women at the group meeting.

**Figure 7**

*Collage of Participants' Collective Objects*


Conversations with the women encompassed three topics: first, their experience with volunteerism; second, their experience of volunteering as a context for lifelong learning; and third, how the volunteering context contributes to their successful aging. Where the conversations around volunteerism focused on the experience, discussions around lifelong learning and successful aging began

with a conceptual discussion. Only after gaining insight into how each woman defines learning and successful aging for herself, could we explore her experiences through volunteerism. Themes constructed for each of the three discussion topics are presented below.

**Topic 1: The Experience of Volunteering**

Discussions with the women revealed themes that were common across their individual experiences with volunteering. These themes were: 1) volunteering provides a sense of purpose; 2) volunteering provides an opportunity to give back to the community; 3) volunteers identify with the mission of their volunteer organization; 4) volunteering must align with other priorities; and 5) the social context is a valued attribute of volunteering.

***The Volunteer Experience Theme 1: A Sense of Purpose***

> "*I feel like I'm helping other people. It gives me something to do, so I'm doing it for me too, but I feel like I'm benefitting other people.*" (Anne)

Each woman strongly identifies that volunteerism fulfills a sense of purpose. They view purpose in conceptual terms of 'helping others' and that their efforts were of benefit to 'someone else'. This is especially true where the volunteers are not working directly with the recipient of their organization's services, for example Anne and Nancy as volunteer sorters of clothes and food. Both women see direct purpose in their task of organizing, and that their purpose is achieved when the sorted items would be moved for consumption.

Where volunteers work closer with the recipients of their services, the sense of helping others has both a conceptual and tangible meaning. Members of the Tartan Team, for example, see their role in a general sense of helping travelers. Anne feels that her foremost purpose is to be a friendly face in the airport. Helga feels her purpose is directing travelers, assisting those who are lost and in need of help. Louise feels her purpose in a specific gap that she fills with the Tartan Team. She has lived experience in Germany and she specifically views assisting German travelers in their native language as a

motivator for her continued commitment with the Team. Similar to Louise, Sherry has lived experience as a nurse prior to her volunteer role with VON. She feels a specific purpose of providing meals, but also sees general purpose in attending to the clients as whole beings, attending to concerns she sees with clients' health and quality of life.

Trilby feels a specific purpose in serving her peers. She began volunteering with both Meals on Wheels and ElderDog Canada around the same time, approximately seven years ago. At the time, she was a recent retiree with good health and capabilities. She felt and continues to feel great compassion for older adults who lose their independence in their later years.

The women describe a sense of self-satisfaction in fulfilling their purpose. For example, they recall positive interactions with travelers or assisting clients in need. Helga says,

> "*there are cute little things that happen. I was down at arrivals one day and this woman came down. Her daughter was crying and she said she wanted to go back upstairs because she said she'd left her doll up there. And I said, 'you just stay here.' And I went up to security and went up and got it. And the smile on that kid's face!*"

They also place importance on appreciation from others in validating their chosen purpose. Anne describes her interactions with the volunteer coordinator as a strong motivator for her continued volunteering, saying, "*every time you go, 'oh thank you for coming. I'm so glad you're here*.'" Nancy shares a similar experience with Feed Nova Scotia, saying,

> "*they're so appreciative. And that's one thing. I happened to go out to the front desk this morning, and the Executive Director just came in and I said, 'good morning' to him and he said, 'thank you for continuing to come in.' And I was like, 'wow!' That's the kind of response we get from the staff all the time is 'thanks yous'. So we're not involved in the policy making and things like that, but boy they appreciate it and show it!*"

In addition to appreciation from leadership, the women value gratitude in a more general sense as validating their purpose as volunteers. Members of the Tartan Team value the appreciation from travelers and choir members appreciate seeing joy on the audience's faces. The women seek out expressions of appreciation in ways relevant to their volunteering context to validate their purpose.

***The Volunteer Experience Theme 2: An Opportunity to Give Back***

> "*I was brought up to always help others. It wasn't a singular thing. You were part of the community. If you want to make the community better, you have to do something*." (Helga)

The six women put little reflection into the decision to volunteer. They describe it as 'in their nature' to volunteer, and that their own parents had set an example of giving back to the community from a very early age. They either engaged with volunteerism throughout their life or waited until the demands of paid work and families lessened. Regardless of when their engagement began, the action of volunteering is more of a reflex. They feel compelled to give back so the decision centres more on *how* to volunteer than the decision to do it at all.

The women recognize the good fortune in their lives, and view volunteering as an avenue to give back to the community. They are appreciative of their continued good health and sufficient means. They view sufficient means in financial terms, such as the ability to retire and owning a car. They also pointedly acknowledged their good fortune in non-financial terms such as support from spouses and other close relations, and independence. As Louise explains,

> "*it's giving back because we're fortunate that we are retired, and we're fortunate that we have a car, and we can drive out, and so it's our way of giving back*." She continues this to say, "*my life has been fairly good. I mean, you know, starting out, I didn't come from a rich family. I had one pair of shoes when I was growing up and one Sunday dress. So you give back what you can. And it doesn't have to be money. You know, helping people, smiling at people, being kind to people, that's what counts*."

The women's volunteer roles also prompt continued realization of their good fortune. Those entering the homes of clients are reminded of the needs within their own community and the difficult living situations of others. Others who may not interact with clients are reminded of their good fortune through their volunteering environment. Nancy, for example, describes an anecdote circulating throughout Feed Nova Scotia that people on their current roster of recipients had been donors to the organization just the year before. She says this serves as a reminder of how vulnerable people are and how quickly situations can change. She said she thinks often about the growing challenges in the city with housing and rising food costs. She equates the work of food banks as being on a treadmill, but knows the situation would be so much worse without organizations like Feed Nova Scotia.

Anne sees her fellow volunteers as a reminder of her good fortune. A woman on her shift uses a wheelchair. Anne self-reflects that it is so easy for her to volunteer, she can hop in her car and be at Mission Mart in minutes. She goes on to describe her friend's commute and the terrible terrain and weather she travels through without a vehicle. It was notable that all women spoke of giving back in terms of their experienced good *fortune.* They identify strongly with a sense of community and they all describe their relative means in passive terms of circumstances that occurred to them, rather than situations they created.

***The Volunteer Experience Theme 3: Identification with the Mission***

> "*I've been volunteering for years and years, but VON really takes my heart… I was really impressed by their ingenuity, you know, how they made do with what they had. And the very real appreciation for that outreach program that they did. And I thought, boy this is something*."
>
> (Sherry)

The women show great reflection on how their values align with their volunteer role and organization. Several organizations that the women volunteer with have well-established and direct missions. The Tartan Team, for example, is a prominent group within the Halifax airport. Collectively,

they provide customer service and help travelers arriving to or departing from the Stanfield International Airport. Volunteers are easily identified by their Nova Scotian tartan vests. At our meetings, each woman participating in the Tartan Team provided a vest as an object that represents her role. They each express that their own love of travel and their own experiences allowed them to relate to travelers. They take great pride in their role of welcoming visitors and ensuring that travelers are informed. In addition to being a source for information, they take pride in improving the comfort of travelers. They each identify with providing items to occupy or comfort parents, notably mothers, traveling with young children.

The mission of Feed Nova Scotia is a layered one. They distribute food to people who are food-insecure, but recognize that this does not solve the root systemic problems of discrimination, low wages, inadequate housing and social supports. As such, they also act as advocates. Nancy embodies this mission. Her role with Feed Nova Scotia is to inspect and sort donations. She is committed to this role as it helps address an immediate need of food distribution. However, in describing her commitment, she speaks poignantly about the underlying factors that contribute to food insecurity. She speaks of the concurrent rising unemployment rate and surging prices of necessities such as food, oil, and housing that are currently present in Nova Scotia. She empathizes with economically vulnerable families saying, “now they said the average apartment is $1600 a month. Average! And when they talk about affordable housing being $1400 a month–for some people, that’s their monthly income!”

Other organizations may have less direct missions, but the mission is no less identifiable by its volunteers. The women involved with choirs value the contribution of arts and entertainment that choirs make to the community. In wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, when choirs were scaled back or halted altogether, the women have a strengthened appreciation for the importance of choirs to the audience and choir members, themselves. Louise describes the Royal Nova Scotia International Tattoo as providing “world class entertainment”. She takes pride in the tremendous commitment that

membership in the choir takes, with daily rehearsals in the months leading up to the yearly event. She also recognizes the joy that the choir provides to both the audience and choir members, themselves. With particular reference to her choir group, Jubilate, that was currently conducting holiday performances, she describes the sacrifices she makes in her own life to ensure everyone is able to benefit from the performances,

> "*for the Jubilate, we have to test every week before we go. We have to test every week to make sure we don't have COVID. Because of that, if we go to a hockey game or go shopping, I wear a mask because it is such a joy to sing. It is such a joy to sing. I would really be upset if I couldn't sing because I got COVID. So I think twice about where I'm going and where I'm going to wear a mask or not wear a mask because I don't want to jeopardize someone else or have them jeopardize me from being able to sing for that week*."

Trilby's experience volunteering with the arts community is similar to that of Louise's with the Tattoo choir. She feels a sense of accountability to her art and her community, saying,

> *"the truth of the matter is that if you want a theatre company or you want a choir or anything else, there is work that has to be done to make it happen. And I always felt inspired, I cared enough about whatever I was doing to say, I can help with that*."

Trilby specifically seeks out volunteer roles because they align with their values of assisting her peers. Beyond her volunteer work with the art community, she chose VON and ElderDog with the intention of helping older adults maintain their independence. Sherry similarly seeks to assist her peer group of older adults. She knew of VON decades before joining as a volunteer. Throughout her career as a nurse, she recognized the "ingenuity" of VON and the valuable role they played in the lives of vulnerable people. She is passionate about her role providing meals to older adults. She says that older adults, especially those living alone, often subsist on "toast and tea" and she knows that the meals she provides are often the only meals the clients are eating.

As the women place great importance on volunteering aligning with their own values, they have also experienced instances where the mission of the organization has changed with time, or their perception of the mission changes. Sherry had joined a well-known international society of older women, based on its mission and reputation among her peers. Her involvement was short-lived, saying,

> "*it was really just social. There was just no purpose for me, you know, it wasn't useful. It wasn't making anyone happy, you know, but yourself. And I mean, you can't knock social things, but I like something social with a purpose*."

Trilby also has prior experience with an organization where the mission in practice was not what she had understood it to be from the organization's description. She feels that once missions are established, they are seldom re-evaluated. Over time, the people participating in an organization or evolving societal needs can cause a mission to drift. She and others feel it is important to move on from an organization that does not align with a volunteer's values. As Trilby says,

> "*there's a ton of opportunities out there. And there is something, there's a volunteer opportunity for everybody. Sometimes it just takes a while to find it. I have a friend who, she turned 70 last year, and is still shopping around for the right thing. She finds things and then turns around, 'nooo… didn't like that'. I just keep encouraging her. She's still hunting*."

***The Volunteer Experience Theme 4: Alignment with Other Priorities***

> "*well, I don't know whether you'd call it a good fit because you just make time for it, you know, instead of watching TV in the evenings, you'd be practicing your music*." (Louise)

Volunteering is not an activity designed to fill vacant space in the women's lives in order to keep busy. On the contrary, the women feel that volunteering is not necessarily a good fit at all; it is something they make space for. Their volunteer roles also come with aspects they may not like, and that sometimes causes them to re-evaluate if they should make a change. The women feel committed to their roles and recognize the ways that their lives benefit from volunteerism; however, there are other

factors in their lives that they weigh against volunteering. Anne and Louise both volunteer together with their husbands. Their respective husbands each share their interests in travel and fondness for the airport, but it is also a logistical decision to volunteer together with the Tartan Team. They both consider the distance of traveling to the airport and sharing a vehicle with their husbands as a factor in their decision.

Apart from Trilby and Sherry's volunteer work with ElderDog and VON, the women's volunteer roles all paused at various points during the pandemic. This prompted a natural point to re-evaluate their commitment to their volunteer roles. Those who paused volunteering all felt a renewed commitment to volunteering, in general, saying that the time spent away caused them to reflect on the importance of the purpose and social connection in their lives and they were very eager to return.

While the women felt a renewed commitment to volunteering, in general, they deliberated carefully over returning to specific roles. In large part, the women are more committed to roles with defined shifts or time commitments. The flexibility of other roles is often what overburdens their time. As a testament to this, Helga is in a period of deep reflection about her volunteer roles. Of the Tartan Team, she says,

> "*I did miss it. Because, you know, I've always done Thursdays so every Thursday would come and I'd say, well, I'm not going to the airport today. And then they sent an email out saying they "weren't sure when people are coming back [and asked], are you still interested in coming back?" And I was probably the first one that answered back and said, "yes*!"

While she has no intention of ending her time with the Tartan Team, she finds her work with choirs is becoming too much. This is especially relevant to her when we met during the holiday season. She is anxious to resume her own travels, now that COVID-19 travel precautions are lifting. She thinks that it would be easier to leave her role as Choir Director altogether than to find temporary replacements each

time she travels. She notes that, during her last absence, she had to train five different people to fill her one role while she was gone; a task that seems daunting to her now.

Nancy views flexibility as a crucial element to her volunteer endeavours. She has a very active volunteer and social life. One thing she values about her role in the Feed Nova Scotia warehouse is that she has the freedom to miss a shift without needing to secure a replacement. She says the management at Feed Nova Scotia recognized skills she had and asked her to take on a client-facing role with the organization. She flatly refused, valuing the freedom her role provides. The women experience wanting more time with their husbands or more leisure time for themselves as cause for consideration. Louise specifically ponders over the intense commitment that the Tattoo choir takes in the early summer months. As she describes,

> "*I do question it, because June is such a lovely month, it's such a lovely month here in Nova Scotia."* She continues, laughing*, "because after that we start getting winter. So, I do question that. But then I think it is so rewarding and so nice to meet people and everything, so I say, 'ahh, I'll do it again, I'll do it next year again.' And then comes March and April and you talk with some of your friends, 'Are you going do it? Are you gonna go in? Are you gonna sing?' and then we all decide we're all going to do it*."

At different points in our discussions, the women raise numerous factors in their decisions of where and how often to volunteer. Anne and Louise describe sharing a vehicle with their spouses and Nancy expresses a need for flexibility. They also express aspects of their roles that can cause them to take pause. Nancy wants to continue with Grandmothers for Grandmothers, but is tiring of the leadership role and the constant communications that comes with it. Trilby has ended her work with Boards of Directors, describing herself now as "a foot soldier". During our meeting, she reflects on her collective volunteer experience, noting the increased burden she feels by organizations that are strictly volunteer-based versus those with paid staff. She says,

"*it didn't really occur to me before, but there is a huge difference between volunteer work for an organization that has paid staff and volunteer work for an organization that is purely volunteer. Because, you know, when there is a paid member of staff, somebody else ultimately is responsible for what you do and negotiating some of the problems with the clients or with supplies or whatever it happens to be, there is somebody else who is ultimately responsible. If it is a purely volunteer organization, you have to be looking out for bigger… I think if you're a responsible volunteer, you're looking out for more than your role. And also, you get sucked into things that you didn't want to do because there doesn't seem to be anybody else. That seems to be the difference between the two*."

Trilby is very self-reflective over her roles, and what she has energy and commitment for of late. She and the other women do consider their age and notice they do not have the energy they once did. They are quick to distinguish, however, between physically tired and drained. The toll that their shifts can take on them can be physically demanding, as they note the early mornings, the long hours spent standing, and moving heavy boxes; however, they also recognize the emotional and physical support they get from others. For the women, there is constant flux, as they evaluate volunteer roles with changing aspects of their lives.

***The Volunteer Experience Theme 5: Social Nature***

*"I love the social interaction. And I need it. It meets the need in me."* (Nancy)

Each of the women recognize and appreciate the social nature of their volunteer roles. The women perceive this social nature as being comprised of both how they engage with others and the intensity of their social engagement. While the six women range in their perceptions of themselves as social beings, they all expressed the social aspect as a driver of their volunteerism. Their social engagement is less dependent on their inherent personality, and more on the volunteer context. That is to say that the women who had multiple volunteer roles have very different experiences with social

engagement depending on their role. Four distinct subthemes emerged through discussions of the women's social experiences. The first subtheme was a discussion of strong social bonds or friendships that were cultivated through the volunteering; the second was the description of the social interactions that take place through volunteer; third, the women spoke in broad terms of their volunteer role as a social environment; and fourth, the women experience volunteerism as an environment for empathy.

**Social bonds and friendships.** The women who volunteered consistently with the same group experience strong connections with those with whom they volunteer. Nancy, for example, shares a close connection with her fellow volunteers at Feed Nova Scotia. They work hard while they sort food donations, and then they always make time for a coffee break during their shift. This tradition is so valued among the group that one of the volunteers on her shift took the initiative during a pandemic shut-down to initiate a zoom visit during their regularly scheduled coffee break. Nancy catches herself when she refers to the weekly call as a "lifeline", saying that may be too dramatic, but she says the fact that everyone joined was a testament to the group's friendship.

Several members of her shift—Nancy included—have been together for more than 20 years. The longstanding group have developed a deep friendship. Nancy credits the shared philosophy and outlook on life for cultivating the bond. In that way, new volunteers are quickly embraced into the social sphere. She says,

> "*sometimes you have people coming in as new to your shift and think maybe they have an edginess or something to them and you think, that may change the dynamics. But all of sudden you realize you've become a team and you accept everything in each other, almost like a family*."

Anne has a similar sentiment with her shift at Mission Mart. In fact, her fellow volunteers are not just *like* family, but indeed are family. She began volunteering at Mission Mart with her sister and several other close friends. That same sister was also a volunteer with the Tartan Team when Anne joined with her husband. Anne jokingly calls her fellow volunteers at Mission Mart her "social gang", but

as she presents photos and describes stories, it is evident that the social bond is shared among her team.

**Social Interactions.** For the women, volunteering is a context for highly-valued social interactions. Social interactions are conceptualized very differently from that of social bonds and friendships. Social interactions can be short-lived, sometimes as a quick check-in on known clients or brief encounters with strangers. Volunteers with the Tartan Team, for example, have a shared appreciation for their social interactions, but distinguish that it is not a place to meet friends. Helga volunteers alone at her booth, and both Louise and Anne volunteer with their husbands. They do partake in appreciation events, such as a breakfast on the anniversary of the Tartan Team's inception, or a holiday party. Besides that, they have little time or opportunity to socialize. The women experience a sense of fulfillment through social interactions, even when the interactions are fleeting and with strangers. They feel an excitement of meeting new people. Anne enjoys that she "*meets some real characters*" through her role and Helga agrees, adding that "*no two days are the same. You meet some really wonderful people*".

While the social interactions are transient by nature, they can be deeply meaningful. Helga provides several anecdotes that demonstrate how fast yet meaningful social interactions can be, she recounts a story from 20 years ago that was so salient to her, it could have occurred that very day.

> "*I forget how long afterwards [the terrorist attacks in New York city on September 11, 2001], but I was sitting… there used to be this little coffee shop on the corner, and a woman called me over and said, that gentleman sitting over there is crying. And I went over. He had been an American air force person stationed in Argentia, Newfoundland, and he had to wait to get back. And I said, you're not nervous about flying? And he said, no. He said, I've flown so many times. I'm just disgusted with the way the world is. He said he went into town the other day and he went to church and they didn't sing a single hymn he knew, it was all this new stuff. So I asked him,*

*what's your favourite hymn? And I said, that was my dad's favourite hymn! So we sat and sang it together*."

The women all place great importance on being available to help people in the moment. They value brief moments of human connection when they were able to provide assistance or simply brighten someone's day as they were passing through. Members of the Tartan Team, for example, seek out travelers who they think may benefit from their attention. Helga provides colouring books and crayons to fussy young travelers. She recognizes the long waits that come with traveling and knows this can be especially hard on children. Similarly, Louise looks for babies, approaching new mothers to tell them about private nursing areas they can use while they wait for flights. In these situations, momentary acts of compassion are extremely valuable to the volunteer.

As service providers, both Trilby and Sherry share a similar experience in their roles with ElderDog and Meals on Wheels. Their interactions with clients are consistent, but brief. They note there is not much room for getting to know clients beyond the scope of the service they provide; however, both Trilby and Sherry recognize the importance that these interactions can have for those they see. Trilby reflected on her time with Meals on Wheels, saying she often saw profoundly lonely people who "*lived alone with their televisions*". Sherry shares this experience, saying, "*you just see how these people [the clients] react to their environment, react to the visits, even though it's only five minutes. You'll see that it brightens them. They really appreciate just being able to talk to somebody*."

**Social environment.** In a broader sense than social interactions, the women value volunteering in a social environment. The women are all very self-reflective of themselves as social beings. The women at the Tartan Team feel fulfillment from being in the "busy" airport, despite that allowing for little time spent with each person. Anne describes, "*we could wander upstairs, downstairs, wherever. Because you're helping people. People stop you and say where are the washrooms? Where are the car rentals? Is there something to eat when you get through security? All those questions*."

Helga similarly appreciates seeing the people at the airport, despite the frenzied pace, saying, "*when we're at the airport there's not much social time. Because we have to be aware*."

Louise and Nancy both share a similar perspective with their choirs. They both view this is the least interactive of all their volunteer roles. They say that there is no room for socializing. As Nancy says, "*you come and you sing and chit chat a bit, and go home*." But both of them emphasize the joy they get from the experience. Nancy muses, "*I can go up there so tired, I think, urgh, I'm really tired. And I come home so invigorated! And I've said to people, 'Do you think it's because you get so much air in your lungs*?'" They both say they feel invigorated by having people working collectively with a common goal. Nancy says, "*I think it's the camaraderie. And when you start out in the new term and you think, we'll never pick up this music. And then all of a sudden it starts to come together. And then there's this whole excitement*."

The other women also experience joy from the camaraderie of the social environment. Trilby considers herself to be an introvert and "a loner" and appreciates how volunteering satisfies her as a social being. To her, walking with a dog around a city block provides a structured and necessary component to her social life. She says,

> "*I need a lot of time by myself. That's just in my nature. But I really do enjoy working on project stuff with people. Whether it is an ElderDog walk like we had last weekend, or preparing COVID kits at the library. I like projects like that. I made a difference. You're chatting as you're doing these things and the goal is good*."

Regardless of how the women see themselves in terms of social interaction, they feel fulfilled through volunteering in the public space.

**Empathy.** A strong element in the volunteer experience is empathy. For some, empathy is what inspired their volunteer work, and for others, the empathy they give and receive is what continues to motivate them. Each of the women extend a great deal of empathy to the people they serve. Trilby and

Sherry were both drawn to their roles because they empathize with loneliness and increasing reliance on others that many older adults experience. As Trilby says, "*I wanted to give the time that I have available to seniors, to people maybe of my age or older who might have done these things in the past but no longer can.*" Nancy similarly feels great empathy for those seeking Feed Nova Scotia services. She is deeply affected by the experiences of single mothers trying to make ends meet. Through the Tartan Team, Anne, Helga, and Louise all seek out travelers who may benefit from their attention. They describe relating to mothers traveling with young children. They provide a humanity to the traveling experience that is governed by rules and regulations.

The women also express their volunteer role as a source of receiving empathy. Volunteering with peers is an important context of their experience. They relate to each other's stage of life and common life events. The women expressed not only feeling empathy for the challenging life events such as losing a spouse, but also the every day experiences and the joys. As Nancy says of her fellow volunteers at Feed Nova Scotia,

> "*I've lost a spouse since I've been volunteering there and one of the others has a husband who is quite ill right now. So there is a lot of empathy going back and forth. And there is always somebody saying, this happened to me this week, and you stop and listen*."

**Topic 2: Lifelong Learning Through Volunteerism**

The women all strongly identify as lifelong learners. They agree that learning is not a direct motivation for their volunteer work, but readily identified volunteerism as a context for lifelong learning. Conversations with each woman began with their conceptualization or philosophy of lifelong learning. Next conversations centered on the ways the women engage with lifelong learning through their volunteer work. Themes of engagement with lifelong learning include: 1) Organized learning for their role, 2) unintentional learning, 3) learning through experience, and 4) self-transformation through learning.

***Conceptualizing Lifelong Learning***

> "*I think if you can continue to learn your whole life, you're going to be content. You're not going to be bored*." (Sherry)

The women regard lifelong learning as both a desire and a responsibility. To them, learning is less an objective and more a way of life. When asked what lifelong learning means to them, they each respond with a similar sentiment that there is no reason to stop learning and you should never shut your mind down to learning new things. As Louise says,

> "*lifelong learning means there's no reason why we as senior citizens can't start learning new things. Like picking up knitting. I've never knitted, so I picked up knitting a couple of years ago. I've never done crocheting, or I did a long, long time ago. So I've picked up crochet. Learning a different language, there's no reason why anyone can't do that. And it just adds to you. You make new friends, you meet new people and it just adds to your hum-drum life as a senior citizen."*

This sentiment carries over to the connection between lifelong learning and volunteerism. While they do not explicitly associate learning as driving their volunteerism, they are motivated by meeting new people and new experiences.

Overall, the women feel confidence and joy in engaging with lifelong learning, but the perceptions were more conflicting when considering new technologies. Several of the women lament that volunteer work is becoming increasingly digitized. The women are appreciative that virtual platforms allowed them to remain socially connected but none are interested in engaging with new technologies. As Nancy stated, "*I don't find it satisfactory. It's a means to an end*." Many felt an annoyance with technology and several described a preference of volunteering with older adults as they were like-minded in their approach with technology. As Trilby said, "*my skills are becoming less and less*

*relevant to modern organizations which is one good thing about volunteering with seniors because most them don't do technology either. So if I need to talk to somebody, I want to talk to them, I phone them*."

The women clarified that it was not a lack of confidence that deterred their technology use, but a lack of interest. The topic arose at the group meeting where they discussed the added complications that stem from technology. Trilby described her experience with event registration, which all of the women understood. She explained that, until recently, attendees would register at a table where a volunteer would look at a paper list and cross off names as people arrived. Now, digital registration is managed on tablets, where accessing a list of attendees was dependent on internet access and know-how of the volunteer. It has transformed what used to be a warm welcome to events into a stressful encounter. The women collectively agreed with this, saying it has lessened their interest in volunteering with such roles.

***Lifelong Learning through Volunteerism Theme 1: Organized Learning to Improve Skills***

> "*Skills, skills… out at the airport, I'm learning more and more everyday. Just on Wednesday, I was out there for training on evacuation, active shooting, and that sort of thing. The Tartan Team is very much a learning environment. I mean we cover that whole airport. We have to know where everything is and we have to know what to do under a lot of different circumstances, even if it's only who to call. So that is very much a learning experience*." (Anne)

The women describe organized training they engage with as part of their role. They easily identified the formal learning events that came with their respective roles so formal learning contexts were at the forefront of discussions. Anne considers the airport to be a learning environment with constant skills upgrades. Members of the Tartan Team are trained in activities such as way-finding, cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), and emergency situations. Helga says that she has more confidence in traveling, knowing that she and those involved with air travel are so well trained. Louise similarly describes formal learning at the airport, "*we've all taken first aid courses. And we all know*

*where the AEDs [automated external defibrillator] are, we know where all those are. And we know who to phone in case something happens, and stuff like this, just to be prepared*."

Louise similarly identifies how she engages with learning through the Tattoo choir. She describes the intensive learning in the weeks leading up to the performances, "*that involves starting the end of May, you start practicing this, about seven acts from around the world and the choir has to learn the national anthem in the native tongue*." Even when not participating in organized choir practices, Louise initiates intentional learning for her role, on her own. She says, "*and this year I understand there are South Koreans coming for the first time. So, I am going to start to look at that just so I don't get so surprised when we get it end of May*." She is introspective in her learning, saying that they are taught the lyrics phonetically, which she says is sometimes hard. She begins practicing, herself, in advance of the organized rehearsals so that she feels prepared. Trilby describes intentional learning she engages with in a way similar to Louise. Rather than speaking about learning events, she describes self-directed intentional learning. Interpersonal skills are intentional learning for her. She describes that she has learned to chair a meeting and how to manage a Board of Directors. She says she has a mentor in mind (one that is no longer living) and draws on how she imagines the mentor would approach different situations. When dealing with clients that she feels may over-burden her, she is very mindful in her interactions and ways she can preserve patience.

The three women involved with choirs all describe the intentional learning that comes with learning new music. They each describe the fulfillment of watching their performance progress through weeks of practice. At times they may feel challenged by learning a new piece of music, but the joy is in the challenge. As Louise says of her commitment to the Tattoo, "*there's a lot of work that goes into it, but everybody loves it and we do it because it's a challenge, I guess*."

Sherry considers the Grandmothers for Grandmothers a learning environment. With a mandate of advocacy, the group makes education a priority. She recounts learning opportunities through in-

person conferences, on-line seminars, and newsletters about the impacts of the AIDS epidemic. Several of the Halifax-based grandmothers have travelled to meet their African counterparts. Travel with Grandmothers for Grandmothers requires that the traveller shares her experiences through formal presentations to the local chapters once she returns. The group also frequently hosts Grandmothers from Africa, arranging public lectures for those women to share their experiences. Nancy considers these opportunities to learn first-hand accounts of the AIDS epidemic to be invaluable. She says, "*I would not have known except what I read in the paper about what the situation was. And I never would have understood.*"

***Lifelong Learning through Volunteerism Theme 2: Unintentional Learning***

"*You know, everybody's life experience contributes to the person they are. And you can learn so much from that*." (Sherry)

In contrast to formal and intentional learning activities, such as organized training and music rehearsal, the women also easily identify unplanned ways they engage with learning. Given the social nature of the women's volunteering roles, at the forefront of unintentional learning is how they learn from each other. They describe how the volunteering context is conducive to conversation and learning from others. Both Nancy and Anne work in a similar environment in their roles with Feed Nova Scotia and Mission Mart. They agree that conversing with others while they work has been an excellent opportunity to learn.

Trilby says volunteering allows you to meet new people, which is always "*a beautiful thing*". She says that different people bring different skills. She specifically notes that younger volunteers often have a fresh approach to doing things. She says ideas can stagnate when people are in their role for a long time. She says younger volunteers can break a "we've always done it this way" mentality. Helga relates to the idea that behaviours can be habitual among established volunteer organizations. She, however,

sees a positive element to this. In her case, a supervisor of the airport had recently retired. Helga has such institutional knowledge of the airport that has helped to orient the new supervisor.

In our discussion, Sherry recounts the ways that volunteers share skills within the Grandmothers for Grandmothers organization. She describes a recent fabric sale, a lucrative local fundraising event for the group, saying,

> "*everybody contributes. And some people don't know a piece of cotton from a piece of tarpaulin, and you just teach. And it's fun to do that. It's fun to see people say, 'oh! I didn't know that.' And I am the same. I didn't know anything about rug hooking. And we would have these sweaters and things donated, wool sweaters, and I would say to some of the other members, 'what the hell are they going to do with those?' And they make wool rugs*!"

***Lifelong Learning through Volunteerism Theme 3: Learning through Experiences***

"*There's a lot of work that goes into it, but everybody loves it and we do it because it's a challenge I guess.*" (Louise)

In speaking with the women, the salience of learning through experience is evident. While discussion flowed freely around all contexts of learning, the women became storytellers when describing their experiential learning. They often described ways they learned and adapted with others, as they collectively navigated new challenges.

A poignant moment with Helga was exploring the immediate changes that took place in the airport after the September 2001 terrorist attacks involving airplanes. She volunteered that day, as travelers from all parts of the world were grounded at the Halifax airport. Rather than typical questions around way-finding and renting cars, she navigated temporary shelter, obtaining medications, and feeding thousands of frightened people. She joked that she spent 14 hours at the airport that day, and the only thing that hurt more than her feet were her cheeks, as she felt the best thing she could do for

these people was smile. In the months that followed, she struggled to learn constantly evolving security measures. Confused and angry travelers used the Tartan Team to question increased security,

> "*dealing with that afterwards, because a lot of people had flown freely. But now all of a sudden you have to take your shoes off, and you can't carry liquids through. So it was a learning curve for everybody. And a lot of people didn't understand… 'well, why do we have to do this? Because that [one incident] happened?' But no, it's because it could happen anywhere*."

A more recent example of collective adaptations at the time of our discussions was the COVID-19 pandemic. Meals on Wheels and ElderDog persisted throughout the pandemic. Sherry and Trilby, along with their colleagues, experienced similar adaptations. They protected themselves as best they could through socially distancing, but this distancing caused great concern for the clients' well-being. Trilby said where she would previously deliver a meal to the client's hand, she would leave it on the step with a phone call to the client to say it was there. She worried constantly, but especially in the summer months, that clients with dementia would forget their meal, and either eat it later after it had spoiled, or not eat it at all. Sherry, similarly, would worry about the mental and physical fitness of her clients when she would go long periods without seeing them. She explained,

> "*there was one lady who was always just so spry and dressed to the nines with scarves and make up. And over about 2 years I would see that declining and I would mention it to the supervisor when I got back. And so they would note that and, if appropriate, they would contact family members, if they had family. I don't know if they ever contacted other health care providers or doctors, things like that, but I hope they did because this lady developed dementia very quickly. I never saw it develop in anybody that quickly*."

The other organizations represented in this research stopped operations at some points, and restarted with modifications. The women shifted from in-person to virtual communications and learned new technologies such as Zoom. Rather than stop performing altogether, the men's choir that Helga

directs transitioned to virtual concerts during the COVID-19 pandemic. She says one of the choir members organized Zoom concerts so that they were able to continue to practice their performances. It allowed the members to maintain connection and engage with new technology. Once permitted, they shifted to socially-distanced, in-person rehearsals. Upon resuming in-person rehearsals, she noticed an unintended benefit to the distancing, which she thinks made the choir better. She describes,

> "*we were practicing in this church in Halifax. We'd have one here, and one there, and the next row was empty, and another here. So they were well spaced out. I used to call them the spaced-out choir. And in a way it made them better because they couldn't depend on the person beside them because they had to totally depend on their own selves*."

Helga has also modified her own behaviour based on her experience with the men's choir. She noticed that they would not read lengthy emails. To prevent countless questions, she has adapted by scaling back the information and sending only the pertinent information for them to focus on.

Nancy decidedly identifies with experiential learning through her choir. As a specific example, her choir was invited to perform at Carnegie Hall in New York City. While she revelled in the overall experience of performing at the famed Carnegie Hall, she noted how the experience made her choir better. She said a day spent rehearsing with a new director brought them to a "whole new level". She and Louise also spoke about learning new music in more general terms. Nancy finds learning new music at first to be a challenge, but then exhilarating when they achieve their goal of learning the piece and put on a great performance. Similar to Nancy, Louise says that she loves the challenge of learning and is very pragmatic when discussing the challenges. With her choir she practices early and often. She takes a similar approach in her work with the Tartan Team. She has noticed that recent lower-cost flights has led to a surge in new travelers. She empathizes with the novice flyer and enjoys leading people through the experience. She spoke of a recent experience with assisting newcomers to Halifax,

"*it was the first time [returning to her role since the pandemic closures], so we were a bit nervous because we haven't done it for two years. And I'm waiting at a German flight and, all of a sudden, I notice while we're looking–we looked around to see what was new and all this–we see this booth with Ukraine. And I thought, that's interesting… So I'm waiting there for the people to come out of the German flight and all of a sudden someone comes up to me and starts talking to me and I had no idea what they were saying. And he said, "Ukraine" and I said, "oh my God". So I brought him over to the booth and there was supposed to have been someone there. And there was no one there. But they left me a phone number and I phone up this number. And there was no one there and so I'm starting to panic. So I started to phone all kinds of other people because these guys don't speak any English and I don't know what to do with them. I didn't want to leave them there. And so I started phoning all these people and I got some guy. He was Operations Manager down at the Y[MCA]. And so I phone up this guy and I said, "hey listen, can you help me, I see your name's here with the Y." And he said, "yeah well, I'm head of the household work at the Y or something, but you're talking about the Ukrainians, my wife knows all about this." So he gave me the telephone number I'd been phoning. And I said, "but I've tried that number", and he said "oh, my wife was just talking. You try again, and she'll be there." So I tried again and we're talking, and that's all taken care of and I go back and there's a couple other families coming in, no English. So through this one telephone number, we were using my phone to give it to the first people, the second group of people, the third group of people*."

***Lifelong Learning through Volunteerism Theme 4: Self-Transformation through Learning***

"*Never shut your mind down to learning something new because sometimes it will totally do a flip of the direction your thoughts might have been going in and someone else presents a very valid point of view*." (Nancy)

The women relate to volunteerism as a context for self-transformation. Explorations of self-transformation through learning were largely conceptual, with the women identifying with the importance of opening your mind to new perspectives. Helga spoke of the empathy she learned from watching travelers. On appearance, travelers may seem inpatient and angry but she has come to realize in her years with the Tartan Team that what may appear as anger is often stress in disguise. When discussing the significance of this realization, she says it taught her to "*never assume*". Where Helga deepened her empathy for others through her work, Trilby has experienced a transformation of herself through her volunteer work. She said, "*I'm a fairly impatient person and I like to go from point A to point B quite quickly. So I have learnt that some people take time to get from point A to B and you just have to slow down and take it at their pace*."

Nancy spoke of transformative learning both conceptually and by providing an example that deeply affected her. While lifelong learning, to her, means never shutting your mind to new ideas, she applies this thinking to her experience volunteering with the Grandmothers for Grandmothers. She said she joined the group with little knowledge of the organization or its mission. Of her experience with the organization, she says,

> "*I mean the whole history with sub-Saharan Africa. I wasn't even familiar with that term. There was a woman who came to speak and she was from Africa and the Director of a wellness clinic. And she was talking about how some of the people who work at the clinic where they have a lot of AIDS patients, they can suffer discrimination just by working there*!"

Nancy said she "*would have never understood the depth of the AIDS crisis without learning from the Grandmothers for Grandmothers organization*."

**Topic 3: Successful Aging through Volunteerism**

Conversations around successful aging began with a conceptual discussion of what successful aging means to each woman. Broad conceptual discussions were then narrowed to their own experience

of volunteerism as a context for successful aging. Conceptually, successful aging to the women means contributing to society for as long as possible, which largely depends on maintaining good physical health. As a context for successful aging, themes were constructed that volunteering allows for 1) personal growth, 2) continued connection to others, and 3) maintaining a positive outlook.

***Conceptualizing Successful Aging: Contributions to Society and the Importance of Health***

"*For as long as possible, contribute. Contribute to your environment and to the world*." (Anne)

The women see contribution to or engagement with society at the forefront of successful aging. Anne measures her own successful aging in terms of contribution. Helga has a similar sentiment, saying, "*keep busy, active, and involved with people*." Nancy is very reflective in thinking of the important role that interactions with other people plays in successful aging. She says,

> "*I think of some people that their life becomes smaller and smaller and not because of finances, but just they're not out and don't want to go out. And just different personalities, I guess, but I think of how small your world can become*."

Through her work with Meals on Wheels, Sherry regularly sees examples of both successful and unsuccessful aging. For her own successful aging, she says, "*it's just one step at a time. Get out there and do things*." She continues, "if you expose yourself to opportunities, they're going to present themselves to you."

Sherry is not alone in drawing on the experiences of others in her conceptions of successful aging. Several of the women use examples of people in their own life as motivation to work towards successful aging. While none of the women expressed emulating positive examples of successful aging, several spoke with a great deal of sadness about parents who had a negative experience with aging. Trilby says witnessing how her own mother felt "*betrayed by her body*" in her later years fuels her to "*be a different kind of old person*". Nancy shared a similar experience of watching her own mother's world shrink in her older age. She relates to what Trilby sees through her role with Meals on Wheels and

ElderDog as "*older people living alone with their televisions*." Nancy said her mother spent much time in her later years watching depressing television programming and relying almost exclusively on her children for entertainment. She says this is what drives her to manage her own aging differently, maintaining a strong social network. Anne also describes how her mother's early death left her father living alone "*staring out a window for 30, 30-some years later*". To her, continuing to be part of the world and interacting would be successful aging.

While the women all consider engagement with society to be the cornerstone of successful aging, they are equally unified that successful aging is dependent on good physical health. As Louise stated, "*firstly, if you're not healthy, I don't think you'll have successful aging. If you have cancer or any other type of illness, then you're successful aging has just gone out the door*." As they feel their successful aging hinges on good health, the women are attuned to the physical vulnerabilities that come with aging. Helga describes the experience of two friends,

> "*I help a couple of women, one of them is legally blind. I do a lot of baking for her and I also take her places and take her shopping, that sort of thing. And I really admire her because even through her afflictions, you know*, *she's having* a *hip replacement. She still manages on her own but she's got to the point that she knows she needs some help. And I really admire that she's willing to say, I need some help*."

She says she uses the experiences of her friends to reflect on her future with her husband. They currently live in their own home, but she says,

> "*I hope when it comes to the time that we can't, that both of us will realize that we need help. I think that's what graceful aging is, is knowing when to say I need some help*." She continues, "*you know there are certain things about aging that are kind of scary, if we do have to give up our house and our independence. I think of both of my friends who are on their own, in apartments, and neither one of them drive. But I'll have to figure out when that*

*time comes… And hopefully I'll have the grace to accept it*."

She draws on her friends who have reached out to her for her own lesson that aging successfully, or "aging gracefully" as she described in this context, is knowing when you need to ask for help.

The women view their good health that enables their successful aging as both good fortune and an objective that they work toward. It is not that this group does not experience health challenges, but rather they view these challenges as conditions they manage rather than those that inhibit their engagement. Several of the women engage in activity with the specific objective of maintaining good physical health. Trilby, for instance, has joined an aqua-aerobics class and loves it. Louise is of a similar mindset saying,

> "*I play tennis about three times a week and pickleball whenever I can, a couple times a week. And one of the things that goes for us is knees. We're always worried about hips and knees which would put a stop to our tennis playing right away. But if you can stay healthy, then it helps in other parts of your life as well.*"

Discussions with the women revealed that they view successful aging as contributing to society, and that contributions are enabled by maintaining good health. Volunteering is one way that resonates strongly with the women as contributing to society. They also view this volunteer context as facilitating their personal growth, connection to others, and positive outlook, which were the three main themes that participants identified as ways volunteering contributes to their successful aging.

***Successful Aging through Volunteering Theme 1: Personal Growth***

"*You don't have to aspire to be 20, or 30, or 40. You just have to keep an open mind and say, 'why could I not do that*?'" (Trilby)

The women all view volunteerism as an activity that enriches their lives. Anne considers an important connection between volunteering and successful aging is that it provides her with renewed sense of purpose. She knows many people who have gone back to work after retiring, a decision that is

not right for her. She credits volunteering with providing her with new experiences. Trilby echoes Anne's emphasis on new experience and purpose. She says that volunteering facilitates successful aging because it keeps your horizons open,

"*It keeps your horizons open and it… I find sometimes and I see this with clients. I find people, that they are stuck in a little rut with the people they've always known and the things they've always done. And comfort is a great thing, but ultimately, I think if you're not growing… and it doesn't have to be in huge ways. It doesn't have to be in huge ways*." She continues that age should not hinder new passions, "*it doesn't have to be big stuff in your life. It's just being open to other possibilities. If something doesn't work well, chuck it, you know. If you start a book and don't like it, chuck it. There are other ones out there*."

***Successful Aging through Volunteering Theme 2: Connection to Others***

"*Volunteering puts you in touch with other interesting people!*" (Sherry)

Sherry and the other women say that volunteerism is a great contributor to successful aging because it enables socialization. Social engagement is a theme that also presented in the experience of volunteering and in lifelong learning within the context of volunteering, and this theme persists into successful aging. Being with others is an important element of successful aging, which lends itself to the context of volunteering. Helga explains,

> "*it keeps me busy, it keeps me active, it keeps me involved with people. That's one thing I found during COVID, especially when we were kind of in our bubbles. You could talk to people and phone them, but it wasn't the same*."

Nancy has a poignant reflection on how volunteering with others helps her manage distress.

> "*I think of some people, that their life becomes smaller and smaller and not because of finances, but just they're not out and don't want to go out. And just different personalities, I guess, but I think of how small your world can become. And I also find I'm reaching a stage where I have*

*more and more friends with major health issues. And I think that can really skew your approach to life. You can think things are…. you get a sadness about you I think. And this helps me right now, I have a relative who's quite ill and I can distract myself through volunteering. And if I wasn't volunteering at all, I'd be at home and it would be so present in my mind*."

***Successful Aging through Volunteering Theme 3: Volunteering for a Positive Outlook***

"*You have to get out and do something. And I think the best way is to help others. It makes everyone feel good. It makes you feel good and it makes the other guys feels good*." (Louise)

The women recognize that volunteering helps them maintain a positive outlook. Louise says, "*volunteering brings positive attitude. Oh yeah, because it gives you positive attitude. It gives you positive attitude. Singing particularly lightens your spirit. All of us.*"

Volunteering allows the women to see positivity in the world around them. Several of the women spoke of volunteering as a way to avoid 'getting stuck in a rut'. Sherry says of volunteering as a contributor to successful aging, "*you could be missing things that you could be enjoying! If you play bridge, start a bridge club. If you like to bake, have a cookie exchange. You know, just little things you can do and meet people and enjoy*." Trilby shares this perspective, saying,

"*if you love something, try to do it for as long as you can. If you can't do [something you love] anymore, how can you, how can you shift that? I mean for somebody who is a runner, for instance, and you can't run anymore, what else can you do that might give you the same kind of satisfaction. It's finding as maybe as your body starts to betray you, find ways that would be successful aging that would be finding to take the joy and satisfaction that you found and move it into something else*."

## Chapter 6: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore older women's experience with volunteering, including volunteering as a context for lifelong learning and how volunteering contributes to their perceptions of successful aging. Following Max Van Manen's methodology for phenomenological inquiry allowed for rich exploration with each woman about her individual experience. Through the collective interviews, I learned that participants derive deep and complex meaning from their volunteer experience, that they readily identify as lifelong learners in a volunteer environment, and that they consciously strive towards their vision of successful aging. The participants of this study challenge perceptions of older women as vulnerable and dependent. Instead, the women each presented her reality as actively engaged in her community, seeking opportunities for continuous learning and growth.

The women who participated all live in Halifax Regional Municipality in Nova Scotia. Five of the six live with her husband and one lives alone. Throughout our discussions, there were several instances where the participants acknowledged gender-based inequities and discrimination that may prevent women from accessing basic needs in older age, let alone resources for aging well. For instance, Nancy reflected on the prevalence of single-parent families who access Feed Nova Scotia, particularly empathizing with the significant proportion who are mothers. Nancy and Sherry were both enlightened to the challenges of many grandmothers in Africa who are raising young grandchildren in poverty. Anne was also quick to preface her experience with volunteering with the fact that she had the relative privilege of not needing to work in her older years. Throughout conversations, the women referenced education, employment, income and wealth—factors that can threaten the global well-being of women, as raised by the WHO (World Health Organization, 2017).

Each of the women self-disclosed that they have the financial resources to be able to volunteer and to live well, and not feel inhibited by the costs. They discussed having the physical and mental capacity to volunteer, and that they felt supported in their volunteer endeavours. In that way, their

perspectives were not inclusive of those who may face financial barriers to volunteering such as transportation costs, who are inhibited by other necessary activities such as time spent at paid work or caregiving, or those who may not have the mental or social resources to volunteer. Living in the same urban centre, they also felt they had an abundance of volunteer opportunities to access. In that way, the relative privilege of the women in this study represents a segment of society, rather than the whole. Furthermore, the geographical and cultural attributes of the local community likely contribute to the women's shared experiences.

This research adds to the knowledge of three interconnected topics: older women's experiences with volunteering, lifelong learning, and successful aging. Conversations revealed four main areas of enlightenment. First is that volunteering is a unique experience that has the potential of highly-valued, multifaceted returns to the volunteer. Second is that socialization is crucial to all three experiences, volunteering, learning, and aging successfully. Third is that the women readily identify as lifelong learners and volunteering is one way they pursue learning. Fourth is that each of the women have a clear vision of what successful aging looks like to her, and volunteering is a conscious activity towards realizing her vision.

**Volunteering as a Unique Experience**

The participants' commitment to volunteering is a testament to the significance that the experience holds. Throughout exploration of the volunteer experience, each woman drew from multiple volunteer endeavours. They each directly refuted the idea that reduced employment and family responsibilities in their older years created space in their lives that volunteering filled. In that way, volunteering for these women does not fill a gap that emerges in older years. On the contrary, the women described a lifelong commitment to volunteerism, an endeavour that they consciously make space for. They described witnessing their parents' commitment to volunteerism, which they in turn imparted on their children. Collectively, they discussed volunteerism as a way of life.

Consistent with previous research presented in this thesis, participants describe feeling multiple beneficial returns from volunteering. These benefits include improved perceptions of health and well-being (Narushima, 2005; Chong et al., 2013; Lee, 2016; Liu et al., 2020), enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem (Narushima, 2005; Warburton and McLaughlin, 2006; Chen, 2016b; Lee 2016), adapting to life changes and learning new skills (Narushima, 2001; Villar et al., 2020; Duay and Bryan, 2006; Warburton and McLaughlin, 2006; Jones and Reynolds, 2019) and positive engagement with others (Chong et al., 2013 and Chen 2016b). This complex set of forces means that volunteering is a truly unique experience that cannot be replicated or replaced with a substitute activity. The women associate powerful positive emotions with their volunteer role, such as finding purpose, feelings of belonging in having found a like-minded group, and gratification in finding a volunteer mission that is in line with their values and beliefs. They also appreciate benefits to their well-being from volunteering, such as friendships, empathy and laughter. In addition to these good feelings, volunteering is a tangible activity that allows them to give back to their community. In that way, volunteerism is a complex construct of internal fulfillment and external expression that makes it a unique and important experience.

Coinciding with this research was a poignant time for reflection over the meaning of volunteerism. Our discussions took place approximately 18 months into the COVID-19 pandemic. Discussions revealed that, even prior to participating in this research, pandemic events caused the women to deeply evaluate the meaning they associated with their roles. Most of the women paused volunteering at points of heightened restrictions. They described feelings of isolation, sadness, and impatience to resume volunteering and other meaningful activities. The women who continued volunteering throughout the pandemic were no less effected by the burden of abrupt changes to how they could serve others. These deep, negative emotions that came with changing or ending a volunteer role, even temporarily, demonstrate that the multidimensional benefits they feel are not easy to replicate in other ways.

While each of the women described complex feelings of fulfillment through volunteerism, none of the women intentionally sought out their volunteer role. Instead, each of the women described it as a serendipitous encounter. Several of the women described hearing of the opportunity from a friend, or from passive information such as newspaper or social media advertisements. They describe approaching their volunteer opportunity with curiosity, but no presumption of commitment or even that it would be a good fit. The serendipitous nature of discovering their deeply meaningful volunteer role heightened feelings of appreciation and reinforced that the experiences cannot be easily substituted with other activities.

All participants endorsed volunteering as a deeply personal, fulfilling endeavour that can benefit the volunteer in numerous of ways. Indeed, the women all described recent, deep reflection over the meaning that volunteerism holds for them, and the gap that would result in their lives from ending their involvement. The complex feelings of fulfillment and contribution make volunteerism a uniquely-valued endeavour. While the women do recognize actual and potential costs of volunteering, they feel highly rewarded for their efforts. The serendipitous nature of encountering these rewards only reinforces to the women that the endeavours cannot be intentionally replicated or replaced with another pursuit.

**Socialization as a Common Thread**

The social nature of volunteering was a common discussion among participants, weaving across topics of the volunteer experience, learning, and successful aging. Like the overall volunteer experience, the social nature of volunteering is multi-dimensional. The women in this study varied greatly in their own self-perception as a social being. Several women readily identified as extroverts, saying they preferred the company of others; where others described themselves as introverts, preferring solitude. Regardless of their preferences and self-perceptions, each of the women choose to socialize with others through volunteerism in a way that is most fulfilling to them.

The social nature of volunteerism is multifaceted, and so the participants make different meaning from different social interactions. Throughout discussions, the women expressed socializing for the benefit of others. This idea of altruistic socialization often arose when discussing the social interaction between volunteers and those they serve. In these instances, even when interactions were rushed or brief, the volunteers took pride in being a consistent and reliable presence for others. Distinct from this, the women value the benefit they receive from the social interactions, themselves. In these instances, they feel deep satisfaction from the social connections they make with like-minded people. It is through these connections that the women speak about empathy and support shared among peers. Last, the women expressed meaning through collaboration with others. They viewed this socialization as working alongside others for a common objective. They derive this meaning both in shared feelings of accomplishment in achieving a common goal, and also in having found a community that shares their ideals and beliefs. Taken together, socialization that happens through a sole volunteer endeavour satisfies the volunteer's need for interaction and own feelings of belonging and collaboration within a community, and also pride in contributing to the social well-being of others.

Conversations with the women revealed that the social nature of volunteerism is versatile in that it allows people to engage with others in ways that is most meaningful to them. Several participants volunteer in settings that facilitate friendship and peer support. They spoke in concrete terms of engaging with others socially, providing examples of conversations and activities they would do together, and the significance the engagement holds. Others derived satisfaction from being in the public sphere, with less individual and purposeful engagement. For these participants, general or abstract experiences of being in a social environment were especially meaningful. These women valued their presence in a busy airport or seeing familiar faces walking through a neighbourhood with as much significance as others value friendships and empathy. The individual and varied experiences

demonstrate that socialization is an extremely versatile attribute of volunteering, and that different environments provide fulfillment in different ways.

Several participants described volunteering with a significant person in their lives, such as a spouse, sibling, or friend. My presumption that women volunteer in part to carve out an identity distinct from their existing family and friend relationships was unfounded with participants of this study. On the contrary, participants described that they like to share the volunteer experience with others. The women spoke of both rekindling past interests and hobbies and sharing new experiences with loved ones. In these conversations, participants described volunteerism as a site of learning and growth that they shared with others.

When exploring learning through volunteerism the women often discussed how they learn through conversation and collaboration with others. The women in this study very much identified with Kimberley et al.'s (2015) concept of knowhow, and the idea that knowledge is co created through dialogue. In that way, the women all asserted that socialization is fundamental for learning. The women also spoke of routine self-improvement that comes with socialization. Notably, they described the versatility of informal learning. They described in great detail how they learn about current events and different points of view from their peers. They noted that socialization through casual conversation allows people to share their insights and how those insights shape who they are. For instance, several of the women shared the same phrase that conversation with others "allows you to keep your mind open to new ways of thinking." The women also described learning about themselves through interactions with others. They shared, for instance, that routinely challenging one's own understanding and own limitations provokes empathy and patience.

Socialization was also at the forefront of discussions about successful aging. When asked how they perceive successful aging, each of the women described active engagement. Emerging from long periods of isolation and social distancing due to pandemic precautions, socialization was a particularly

salient aspect of aging well. The women all spoke of the positivity and joy they feel in engaging with others. Optimism and positive outlook are attributes of aging well that each of them felt are in direct association with socialization.

Conversations around socialization revealed the interconnectedness between volunteering, learning, and successful aging. The women who participated in this study each spoke about the positive emotion they felt from socialization, and that it facilitated their own enlightenment and positive outlook. Thus, the effects of socialization are compounded. Learning from others, especially in informal, collaborative settings, improves self-confidence and self-image. In that way, volunteering facilitates learning, which in turn, facilitates successful aging. The women show that volunteering can be a key and accessible avenue for socialization. Social interaction through volunteering is a great public resource to enhance cognitive and emotional capacity, facilitate adapting to change, and feelings of self-confidence. These attributes are pivotal for maintaining a healthy aging population.

**Volunteering as a Learning Environment**

The women in this study share a similar philosophy and approach to learning. Each of the women identify as lifelong learners. Perhaps the women represent especially civic-minded people, demonstrated by their commitment to volunteerism. They each describe not only a joy and appreciation for lifelong learning, but a responsibility to stay informed and adapt to new ideas. They also view learning with a broad lens, including new skills, enlightened viewpoints, and emotional tools. As such, the women describe actively seeking opportunities to learn and view knowledge that is in keeping with Kimberley et al.'s (2015) concept of *knowhow*, which encompasses cognitive and emotional resources necessary for managing everyday life, health and well-being, and adaptations to life changes. The women also hold a similar importance of empathy and learning with others to navigate challenges as depicted by Kimberley et al.

While none say they pursue volunteerism with a specific objective to learn, they all view volunteerism as a learning environment. The women's perceptions of learning specifically through volunteerism very much aligns with Narushima's (2001, 2005, 2018) assertion that volunteerism acts as a self-help mechanism. The women were self-reflective in how learning through volunteerism improved their self-perceptions. They frequently described that volunteering allowed them to interact with interesting people and made themselves feel more interesting. Feelings of self-confidence were also enhanced by staying aware and deepening their understanding of current events and topics. Ideas of learning for self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-perception are in line with Lamb and Brady's (2005) concepts of women learning in older years. Those authors asserted that, through learning, women expanded their self-perception beyond a role of support and caretaker. The women in this study value learning with other women, distinct from a patriarchal learning environment.

The women's discussions of the impacts of learning on self-perception are very much in line with Narushima's (2005) research of self-help and transformative mechanisms within the context of volunteering. Narushima describes how volunteering forces the volunteer to self-reflect on their own perspectives, consider differing backgrounds and perspectives of others, compromise, and work together with others. The women in this study similarly recounted examples of facing dilemmas in their volunteer roles that ultimately led to reflection and self-transformation. Some examples were profound revelations to the volunteer, such as Nancy's exposure to the lived experiences of grandmothers in Africa, or Helga deciding to step away from her role as Choir Director to make time for travel with her husband. Other examples were subtler, such as Trilby recognizing that she needed to practice more patience with others. Regardless of the scope, the experiences that the women shared aligned with Narushima's comparison between these inner conflicts and Mezirow's theory of disorienting dilemma and the transformative learning process. Conversations with the women suggest that the context of volunteering may be particularly supportive of transformative learning. As they described, the social

nature of volunteering and the empathy shared among volunteers may create safe environment for individuals to reflect and test new assumptions and actions.

The experiential nature of the transformative learning process and of the act of volunteering, itself, means that experience is deeply embedded in learning within a volunteer context and so cannot be isolated as one way of learning. As such, the women seldom spoke in direct terms of *learning through experience,* but instead discussed observations and interactions that led to deep learning. This deep learning was reflected in the salience, detail and emotion that resonated with the women. The conversations around experience and self-transformation, both in theoretical terms and from their experiences, reveal that the women value self-reflection and self-evolvement. These values align with Narushima's (2001) stance that learning through volunteerism can help adults retain adaptive capability and enhance their personal growth.

Where their perceptions of what learning is and how it is achieved through volunteerism is in line with previously discussed research, perceptions of why people learn is also aligned with McClusky's (1974) proposal that older adults learn with a purpose to cope, express themselves, contribute, and influence. It is evident that the women share these learning aims. While participants did not discuss coping with a negative connotation, they very much described learning with a purpose of maintaining mental health, positive outlook, and adapting to life's changes. Their volunteer activities all directly demonstrate how they express themselves and contribute to their communities.

Incidental knowledge that is unintentional yet conscious is a prolific learning experience for the women in this study. Their experiences most often involved discussions with fellow volunteers. They described the conversations that happen either while they work or during designated breaks where they purposefully connect with others. While by its very nature unintentional and unconscious learning is not recognized in the moment, upon reflection the women easily resonated with learning through socialization. They often spoke of this in context of giving and receiving empathy and learning to adapt

to new ways of doing things. This incidental learning helps the women navigate intense experiences of change and loss.

Just as volunteer experiences are multi-dimensional, so are experiences with learning. The women in this study share a broad perception of learning that encompasses their mental and emotional capabilities, enlightened perspectives, and new ways of doing things. They each consider learning to be a responsibility to themselves and others, but do not feel a negative connotation to the responsibility. On the contrary, the women spoke with true joy and excitement in their learning. This joy and excitement encourages them to try new things, and keep their mind open to new ideas. Their perspective enabled them to readily see opportunities for learning, both in transformative ways but also through routine, incidental encounters.

**Successful Aging and Volunteerism**

The women in this study feel invested in aging successfully as they do lifelong learning. While they certainly identify with Rowe and Khan's (1997) later definition of successful aging as low probability of disease, high cognitive and physical functioning and active engagement with life, they decidedly put active engagement at the forefront. The participants recognize physical and cognitive aspects of successful aging, but these aspects were secondary to feelings of contribution and engaging fully with life. They view physical and cognitive health as a facilitator in successful aging. They frequently discussed how aging can change physical health and cognition and drew on experiences of watching loved ones affected by these changes. In that way, they agreed with Vaillant and Mukamal's (2001) definition of decline, change, and development; however, the discussions gave no sense that the women were striving to head off dependency. In that way, their experiences align with Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2009) contradiction to a fatalist view of aging. There was never a discussion of *until*, such as 'I will volunteer *until* I am no longer able.' Instead, the women spoke that in the sense of activity, the decision was not to do less, but to do differently. In that way, they had an excitement of what would come next.

They also shared a similar sentiment of not wasting time on activities that do not add to one's life. The women were candid in their drive to protect against isolation and withdrawing from society. Their perceptions that engagement leads to positive physical and mental health is very much in line with Chong et al.'s (2013) assertion that engagement with life leads to good health, caring engagement, productive engagement.

Participants' discussions were aligned with previous researchers who describe multidimensional views of aging that consider mental and physical health, engagement, and positivity. In exploration of successful aging, several authors [such as Knight and Riciardelli (2003), Rossen et al. (2008), Nosraty (2015), and Teater and Chonody (2020)] have presented a list of factors that participants discuss as contributors to successful aging, often ranked by priority or prevalence within the discussion. This study did not reveal such a list of factors. Likely due to the nature of the volunteer context, discussions heavily focused on active engagement and feelings of contributions. Factors such as financial security, aging in place, and death were not deeply discussed. In fact, there was little discussion of declines, apart from examples they had seen in others. They spoke of illness but in terms of changes that could be managed with proactive and adaptive behaviour. In that way, their views greatly aligned with the work of Vaillant and Mukamal (2001), who described declines, change, and development.

While participants do not volunteer with an objective of learning, they do consider volunteering as a deliberate activity towards successful aging. The emphasis on engagement is likely influenced by the values of the women who participated in this study, as impassioned volunteers. The emphasis on engagement was likely also impacted by the preceding conversations around the experience of volunteering and lifelong learning, both of which highly centered on engagement and socialization. The women were also likely representative of a society that was feeling negative effects of longstanding social distancing and isolation policies associated with COVID-19. Although participants in this study explored the meaning of a successful aging with more focus on engagement than others, they did

explore the experience of volunteerism with similar descriptors as other authors used to describe successful aging. For instance, participants of this study discussed how volunteering positively impacted social relationships, outlook, health, acceptance and adaptation [(Vaillant and Mukamal (2001), Knight and Riciardelli (2003), Teater and Chonody (2020)]. In turn, the women discussed how volunteerism leads to successful aging. They described this philosophically, such as volunteering allowing them to see their relative good fortune and that people are striving to make the world better, but also felt joy from the direct engagement with their volunteer activities and the impact of other people. In that way, in this study, volunteerism was the mechanism that facilitated these same attributes of successful aging that were discussed by other authors.

Participants in this study were heavily influenced by their parents in their decision to volunteer. Parents were also a strong influence in how the women perceive and approach successful aging, but in a countering way. Several of the women had direct experiences with a parent whom they felt aged unsuccessfully. The language they used to describe past experience, such as a mother feeling "*betrayed by her body*," or a father spending his final 30 years "*staring out a window*" profoundly convey the impact that their parents had on them. The participants of this study predominantly want to feel more joy from their life than they felt their parents had in their later years. Some participants also felt burdened by their parents' outlook, feeling like they had to entertain their parent. These same participants expressed not wanting to impose a similar burden on their own children.

One striking philosophy that is shared among all women in this study is that they approach successful aging as a conscious pursuit. They each place great value on engagement with others, a value which may be amplified with this group, given their commitment to volunteerism. A trait that may be extended to the broader community focused on successful aging, is that they all have a very defined and personal vision of what successful aging looks like and deliberate steps in how they achieve it.

**Contributions**

This study contributes to the knowledge of older women's experiences with volunteerism, lifelong learning, and successful aging. Phenomenological methodology guided this research process through exploration of individual experiences through semi-structured interviews, making meaning of individual experiences, and making meaning of the collective experience. This research added to the collection of research guided by phenomenological methodology. Incorporating the use of objects was a valuable method for both the participant and researcher. The participants all embraced this method and the variation of chosen objects revealed insights into the individuality and commonality among the women. Specifically incorporating the use of objects at the beginning of the interview was intended to create a comfortable and empowering environment for the women who would shape the initial discussion. In reflection, the use of objects facilitated numerous insights and conversations that would not have happened without their presence. The methods of verbal discourse and use of objects complemented each other well. This study contributes to the knowledge of arts-informed research and suggests ways to successfully incorporate the use of objects.

This research revealed insights into three often overlooked areas of exploration: the experience of the volunteer, older women as learners, and successful aging. This study was distinct from the larger collection of research exploring the (monetary) value of volunteer service, the benefits to the recipients of the volunteer service, or the benefits to the broader community. Instead, this study explored the experience of the volunteer. This exploration revealed how volunteering provides a sense of purpose, enhances self-perception and development of the self, feelings of belonging, and co-creation of knowledge through shared discussion with peers. These contributions make profound impacts to the individual, but also to communities looking to age successfully. In that way, this research shows how important volunteer organizations can be within a community. Volunteer organizations can provide a

positive and accessible environment for like-minded individuals to come together to make change, co-create knowledge, and share support.

**Application of Findings**

This research lends to application of findings in several distinct ways. First, is that volunteering contributes to well-being. The experiences that the women in this study shared show that volunteering facilitates feelings of self-confidence and purpose, and fights feelings of loneliness and isolation. Where older women are at greater likelihood of living alone in later years, volunteering can provide a social network for engagement with community that exposes oneself to new ideas and ways of looking at the world. As exemplified with this study, volunteerism is extremely versatile in location, type of service, role, and how often the volunteer chooses to engage. As such, there are volunteer opportunities that accommodate varying lifestyles, values, and preferences of a volunteer. Increasing awareness of the availability and potential benefits of volunteering to the volunteer may increase engagement with volunteerism among older adults, thereby improving quality of life of older adults. Increased awareness could come as information from volunteer organizations, themselves, or through less formal communication through friends, families, and other supportive people such as primary healthcare providers.

While not an objective of this study, conversations highlighted the breadth of ways communities benefit from the presence of volunteer organizations. Several participants described witnessing the impact that their services directly made on the recipient and their families. For instance, they discussed how services such as dog walking and meal delivery can fend off isolation and feelings of loneliness. The participants in this study demonstrate how their attention can be a lifeline to older adults, as they can alert family members and other care providers in times of trouble.

The findings of this study also revealed that participants proactively envision what it means to them to age successfully, and they take actions to achieve their vision. Their experiences support that

individuals should carefully consider and plan for the type of life they would like to have in their older years. It is commonplace to plan finances and living arrangements decades in advance. Less attention is paid to preserving social networks and personal growth. The women in this study demonstrate from their own experiences and the accounts they have witnessed of others, that planning and action can provide deeply satisfying experiences in their older years.

**Future Directions**

This research unveiled two distinct areas that warrant future research. The first, is that volunteering with the arts community is an especially meaningful experience. Out of the six participants, four actively participated in choirs. A fifth volunteered with textile arts, such as quilting. Participants were exceptionally animated and passionate when speaking about their volunteer work with the arts. They expressed a strong sense of camaraderie with their fellow volunteers and fulfillment in contributing to the arts. The interviews took place during the winter holiday season, and the participants took great pride in the contributing to joy, entertainment, and fundraising through concerts celebrating Christmas and Hanukkah. Indeed, they each describe that the choirs provide them with positive attitude and lift their spirits.

Artistic performances are a creative outlet that involve a great deal of learning. This involves the learning of lyrics and melody, but also responding to instruction of the choir director and adapting to their fellow performers. Choir members learn with others, and can see immediate impacts of their engagement and knowledge on the community. Further research into choirs, and the arts, more broadly, could explore it as a learning environment and how it contributes to successful aging.

Another important area of future research is exploring how people approach successful aging. It would be a worthwhile endeavour to explore with those who self-identify as aging well, how they characterize, act towards, and achieve successful aging. Where considerable research has explored physical, cognitive, quality of life determinants of successful aging, more attention is needed towards

how older adults work towards aging in a healthier and fulfilling way. This could inspire individuals to be more reflective and proactive in preparing for their future.

**Conclusion**

This study titled*, At her Age,* is a phenomenological inquiry into the experience of older women volunteers in Nova Scotia, and their experiences with lifelong learning and successful aging in a volunteer context. I used individual interviews and the use of objects to explore and make meaning of the individual experiences. I compiled themes that described the collective volunteer experience, that centred on purpose, an opportunity to give back to the community, identification with the mission of their volunteer organization, how volunteering fits within other lifestyle factors, and the importance of the social nature of volunteering. I also compiled themes of learning around learning for their role, unintentional, experiential, and transformative learning. Finally, I compiled themes of successful aging that centred on how volunteering contributes to perceptions of successful aging, in terms of contributing to one's own self, connection with others, and maintaining a positive outlook. These themes were presented back to participants to ensure themes effectively capture the experience and resonate with the individual participants.

Themes revealed that volunteering is a highly valued experience to the women that they could not and would not replace. The social nature revealed itself to be not only a crucial element to the volunteer experience, but also to engagement with learning and to successful aging. Socialization, in fact, has a compounding affect in how engagement facilitates learning, which, in turn, improves self-image and self-perceptions of successful aging. The women in this study readily identify as lifelong learners and support volunteering as one way they pursue learning. Finally, the women in this study have a clear vision of what it means to her to age successfully and actively pursue volunteer opportunities as a way to achieve this vision.

This study contributes to qualitative literature incorporating phenomenological and arts-informed inquiry. The study also contributes to the knowledge of the volunteer experience, and the significant, adaptable, and accessible context that volunteerism can play in lifelong learning and successful aging. It is hoped that this knowledge be applied to encourage individuals to volunteer for their own well-being and for the collective benefit to individuals in the community.

**References**


Aberg, P. (2016). Nonformal learning and well-being among older adults: Links between participation in Swedish study circles, feelings of well-being and social aspects of learning. *Educational Gerontology,* 42(6), 411-422.

Baltes, M. M., & Carstensen, L. L. (1999). Social-psychological theories and their applications to aging: From individual to collective. In Bengtson, V.L. & Schaie, K.W. (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of aging* (pp. 209-226). Springer Publishing Company.

Berihun, G., Kumsa, M. K., Hussein, A., Jackson, J., Baksh, A., Crutchley, J., Ellis, S., Ma, Y. (2015). Reflections on using physical objects as data generation strategies: An example from a study of youth violence and healing. *Qualitative Social Work,* 14(3), 338-355.

Brown, N. (2019). Identity boxes: using materials and metaphors to elicit experiences. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology,* 22(5), 487-501.

Browne, C. (1998). *Women, feminism, and aging*. Springer.

Bryanton, O. (2018). *Pioneers in aging: Voices of women age 85 and older aging in place in rural communities*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Prince Edward Island.

Bushnik, T., Tjepkema, M., & Martel, L. (2018). Health-adjusted life expectancy in Canada. *Health Reports,* 29(4), 14-22.

Butler-Kisber, L. (2008). Collage as inquiry. In Knowles, J. G., & Cole, A. L (Eds.), *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research* (pp. 265-276). Sage.

Chen, L. K. (2016a). Not just helping: What and how older men learn when they volunteer. *Educational Gerontology,* 42(3), 175-185.

Chen, L. K. (2016b). Benefits and dynamics of learning gained through volunteering: A qualitative exploration guided by seniors' self-defined successful aging. *Educational Gerontology,* 42(3), 220-230.

Chong, A. M. L., Rochelle, T. L., & Liu, S. (2013). Volunteerism and positive aging in Hong Kong: A cultural perspective. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development,* 77(3), 211-231.

Cole, A. L., & Knowles, J. G. (2008). Arts-informed research. In Knowles, J. G., & Cole, A. L (Eds.), *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research* (55-70). Sage.

Commission of the European Communities (CEC). (2001). Communication from the Commission: making a European area of lifelong learning a reality, Luxembourg : Office for Official Publications of the European Communities . (COM (2001) 678, final of 21.11.01. Retrieved 2021, April 4 from https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2001:0678:FIN:EN:PDF.

Culshaw, S. (2019). The unspoken power of collage? Using an innovative arts-based research method to explore the experience of struggling as a teacher. *London Review of Education,* 17(3), 268-283.

Delors, J. (1996). The Four Pillars of Education. In Learning: The Treasure within. Report prepared for UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century (highlights). Retrieved 2021, October 28 from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000102734.

Duay, D. L., & Bryan, V. C. (2008). Learning in later life: What seniors want in a learning experience. Educational Gerontology, 34(12), 1070-1086.

Duguid, F., Mündel, K., & Schugurensky, D. (Eds.). (2013). *Volunteer work, informal learning and social action* (Vol. 1). Springer Science & Business Media.

Findsen, B. (2006). Social institutions as sites of learning for older adults: Differential opportunities. *Journal of Transformative Education,* 4(1), 65-81.

Formosa, M. (2014). Four decades of Universities of the Third Age: past, present, future. *Aging & Society,* 34(1), 42-66.

Fristrup, T., & Grut, S. (2016). Lifelong learning for active Aging in Nordic museums; archives and street art. *Studies in the Education of Adults,* 48(2), 210-224.

Garner, J. D. (1999). *Fundamentals of feminist gerontology*. Haworth Press.

Gibbard, R. (2017). Sizing up the challenge: meeting the demand for long-term care in Canada. In: *Ottawa the Conference Board of Canada* (Vol. 27). Retrieved 2021, April 4 from https://www.cma.ca/sites/default/files/2018-11/9228_Meeting%20the%20Demand%20for%20Long-Term%20Care%20Beds_RPT.pdf.

Goulding, A. (2013). How can contemporary art contribute toward the development of social and cultural capital for people aged 64 and older. *The Gerontologist*, 53(6), 1009-1019.

Grami, N., Tuazon, J. R., Kalia, S., Lawson, A., Li, J., Savage, R. D., & Rochon, P. A. (2022). Promoting healthy aging in older women: A call to action. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 70(3).

Guo, S., & Shan, W. (2019). Adult Education in China: Exploring the lifelong learning experience of older adults in Beijing. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education,* 2019(162), 111-124.

Hachem, H., & Vuopala, E. (2016). Older adults, in Lebanon, committed to learning: Contextualizing the challenges and the benefits of their learning experience. *Educational Gerontology, 42*(10), 686-697.

Hagarty, B. (2015). *Peer support: A case study of the Helping Hands Program*. [Unpublished Master's thesis]. Dalhousie University.

Hahmann, T. (2021). *Volunteering counts: Formal and informal contributions of Canadians in 2018*. Statistics Canada. Retrieved on 2021, October 26 from https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00002-eng.htm.

Jenkins, A., & Mostafa, T. (2015). The effects of learning on wellbeing for older adults in England. *Aging & Society,* 35(10), 2053-2070.

Jones, R., & Reynolds, F. (2019). The contribution of charity shop volunteering to a positive experience of aging. *Journal of Occupational Science,* 26(4), 524-536.

Kimberley, H., Golding, B., & Simons, B. (2016). The company of others: Generating knowhow in later life. *International Journal of Lifelong Education,* 35(5), 509-521.

Knight, T., & Ricciardelli, L. A. (2003). Successful Aging: Perceptions of adults aged between 70 and 101 Years. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 56(3), 223-245.

Kolb, D.A. (2014). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. FT press.

Kukkonen, T., & Bolden, B. (2018). Teaching lives: An arts-informed exploration of teacher experience. *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal,* 3(2), 150-171.

Lamb, R., & Brady, E. M. (2005). Participation in Lifelong Learning Institutes: What turns members on?. *Educational Gerontology*, 31(3), 207-224.

Laslett, P. (1991). *A fresh map of life: The emergence of the third age*. Harvard University Press.

Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (2009). *The third chapter: Passion, risk, and adventure in the 25 years after 50*. Sarah Crichton Books.

Lee, Y. H. (2016). From learners to volunteers: A qualitative study of retirees' transformative learning in Taiwan. *Educational Gerontology,* 42(12), 809-817.

Liu, Y., Duan, Y., & Xu, L. (2020). Volunteer service and positive attitudes toward aging among Chinese older adults: The mediating role of health. *Social Science & Medicine,* 265, 113535, 113535–113535.

Mark, R. (2018). Promoting age friendly universities which are sustainable and open to all: A new challenge for the academy? *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning,* 20(2), 169-183.

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review,* 50(4), 370-396.

Maslow, A. H. (1970). New introduction: Religions, values, and peak-experiences. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology,* 2(2), 83-90.

McClusky, H. Y. (1974). Education for aging: The scope of the field and perspectives for the future. *Learning for Aging*, 324-355.

Mezirow, J (2009). Transformative Learning Theory. In Mezirow, J., & Taylor, E.W. (Eds.), *Transformative learning in practice: Insights from community, workplace, and higher education* (pp. 18-31). John Wiley & Sons.

Narushima, M. (2001). *The changing meaning of voluntarism in an aging society, experience of senior volunteers in Toronto*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Toronto.

Narushima, M. (2005). 'Payback time': community volunteering among older adults as a transformative mechanism. *Aging & Society,* 25(4), 567-584.

Narushima, M. (2008). More than nickels and dimes: The health benefits of a community-based lifelong learning programme for older adults. *International journal of lifelong education*, 27(6), 673-692.

Narushima, M., Liu, J., & Diestelkamp, N. (2018). I learn, therefore I am: A phenomenological analysis of meanings of lifelong learning for vulnerable older adults. *The Gerontologist*, 58(4), 696-705.

Nosraty, L., Jylhä, M., Raittila, T., & Lumme-Sandt, K. (2015). Perceptions by the oldest old of successful aging, vitality 90+ study. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 32, 50-58.

Nova Scotia Department of Seniors. (2017). *Shift: Nova Scotia's Action Plan for an Aging Population*. Province of Nova Scotia. Retrieved on 2021, April 6 from https://novascotia.ca/shift/shift-action-plan.pdf.

Obhi, H. K., Hardy, A., & Margrett, J. A. (2021). Values of lifelong learners and their pursuits of happiness and whole-person wellness. *Aging & mental health*, 25(4), 672-678.

Province of Nova Scotia (2022). *Action for health: A strategic plan 2022–2026*. Retrieved on 2022, September 6 from https://actionforhealth.novascotia.ca/sites/default/files/2023-09/action-for-health-strategic-plan-for-nova-scotia.pdf.

Rossen, E. K., Knafl, K. A., & Flood, M. (2008). Older women's perceptions of successful aging. *Activities, Adaptation & Aging*, 32(2), 73-88.

Rowe, J. W., & Kahn, R. L. (1987). Human aging: usual and successful. *Science,* 237(4811), 143-149.

Rowe, J. W., & Kahn, R. L. (1997). Successful aging. *The Gerontologist,* 37(4), 433-440.

SCANS. (2016). *Seniors' College Association of Nova Scotia*. Retrieved on 2021, July 19 from https://www.thescans.org/

Schmidt, R. M. (1994). Healthy aging into the 21st century. *Contemporary Gerontology,* 1(1), 3-6.

Schugurensky, D. (2000). *The forms of informal learning: toward a conceptualization in the field*. WALL Working Paper 19, Centre for the Study of Education and Work, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto.

St. Clair, R. (2015). *Creating courses for adults: design for learning*. Jossey-Bass.

Statistics Canada. (2019). *13-10-0389-01 Life expectancy, at birth and at age 65, by sex, three-year average, Canada, provinces, territories, health regions and peer groups [Data table]*. Retrieved on 2021, September 21 from https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1310038901.

Statistics Canada (2021). *Older adults and population aging statistics*. Retrieved on 2021, July 26 from https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/subjects-start/older_adults_and_population_aging

Teater, B., & Chonody, J. M. (2020). How do older adults define successful aging? A scoping review. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development,* 91(4), 599-625.

Vaillant, G. E., & Mukamal, K. (2001). Successful aging. *American Journal of Psychiatry,* 158(6), 839-847.

Van der Vaart, G., van Hoven, B., & Huigen, P. P. (2018). Creative and arts-based research methods in academic research. Lessons from a participatory research project in the Netherlands. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research.* 19(2).

van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. The Althouse Press.

van Manen, M. (2016). *Writing in the dark: Phenomenological studies in interpretive inquiry.* Routledge.

Villar, F., Serrat, R., Celdrán, M., & Pinazo, S. (2020). Active aging and learning outcomes: What can older people learn from participation?. *Adult Education Quarterly,* 70(3), 240-257.

Walter, P. (2009). Philosophies of adult environmental education. *Adult Education Quarterly,* 60(1), 3-25.

Warburton, J., & McLaughlin, D. (2006). Doing it from your heart: the role of older women as informal volunteers. *Journal of Women & Aging,* 18(2), 55-72.

World Health Organization. (2017). *Decade of Healthy Aging 2020-2030*. Retrieved on 2021 September 4 from https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/decade-of-healthy-ageing-plan-of-action

Yamashita, T., López, E. B., Soligo, M., & Keene, J. R. (2017). Older lifelong learners' motivations for participating in formal volunteer activities in urban communities. *Adult Education Quarterly,* 67(2), 118-135.