IDENTITY IN OLD AGE: A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

by

SHARON R. KAUFMAN

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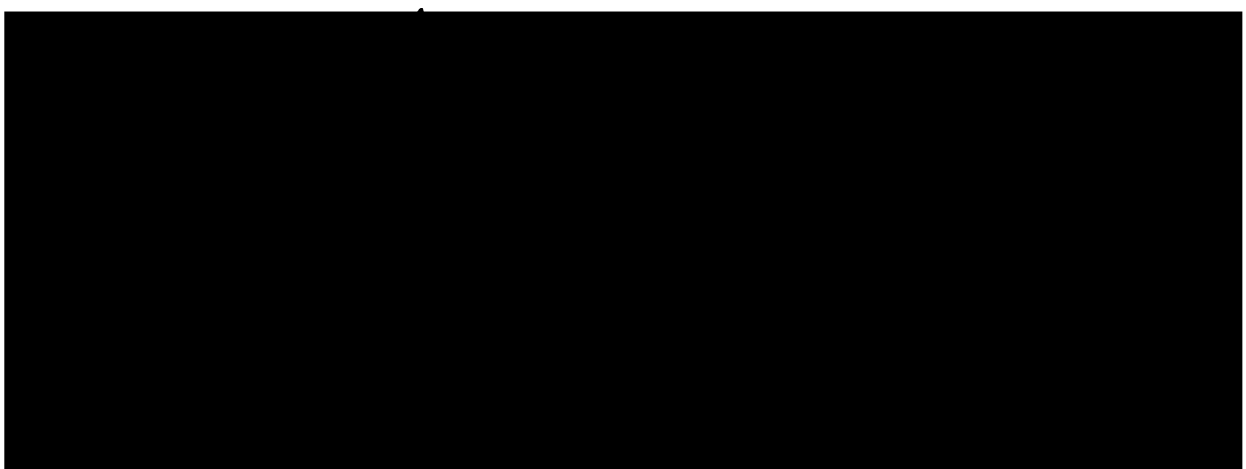

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an enquiry into the concept of identity in a group of West Coast, urban, middle-class Americans over the age of 70. I have tried to examine the cultural basis of individual identity and the way it continues to develop in old age and to discover how old people see themselves and how they understand and deal with the aging process. This study derives primarily from the disciplines of psychological anthropology and social gerontology and it seeks to refine and build upon theory in both those fields.

Sixty alert, articulate individuals were chosen as study participants. From this population, I chose a subsample of 15 people for intensive systematic interviewing. These 15, from whom I collected detailed life histories, typify the range of past and present experience of the larger group. Interviewing and supplementary participant-observation were conducted over a nine-month period in 1978 and 1979.

This dissertation demonstrates a method for analyzing and isolating cultural components of identity that I have called themes, or cognitive areas of meaning, which people create in the construction of their autobiographies. Themes explain, unify and give substance to perceptions of the self and reality. I show how their identification provides a method for understanding developmental processes in old age and a framework for analyzing the dynamic role of cultural values in individual behavior patterns and the construction of identity.

I found that identity continues to evolve in old age and that these study participants construct their identities according to five principles:

1) their need for coherence and logic in defining and explaining life experience;
2) their need for continuity across the life span;
3) the limitations and opportunities faced at different life periods due to social and historical circumstances;
4) the values of their cultural milieux;
5) the interpretation of present circumstances, which include social setting, interaction patterns and the impact of conceptions of the past on them.

The way identity is defined by my informants at present is determined by the combination of these five principles, the way they are symbolically linked and the degree to which each is emphasized.

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1. INTRODUCTION: IDENTITY AND THE CONCEPT OF THEME

> Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.
>
> ----Clifford Geertz

I began this study as an enquiry into the concept of identity in a group of West Coast, urban, white, middle-class Americans over the age of 70. I wanted to examine the cultural basis of individual identity and the way it continues to develop in old age. My aims have been to discover how old people see themselves and how they understand and deal with the aging process. I concentrated primarily on the collection and analysis of life history material from a select group of informants in order to achieve these aims.

Theoretical Perspectives

This study of the cultural basis of identity in old age derives primarily from two disciplines--psychological anthropology and social gerontology--and seeks to refine and build upon theory in both those fields. As a field, psychological anthropology was stimulated by the impact of Freud in the 1920s and 1930s to explore several key questions: What is the relationship between "culture" and "nature"? Can

the anthropologist verify psychoanalytic theory cross-culturally? And do members of a single society share a common cognitive orientation, world view, personality, and/or national character? As the field grew and proliferated over the years, researchers focused mainly on the topics of childrearing and socialization, personality type, national character, perception and cognition and acculturation, and the dominant interpretive approach used in these studies was psychoanalytic.

The studies of childrearing practices and adolescent behavior focused on the process by which an individual <u>becomes</u> cultural in the first place. Researchers defined and clarified the role played by cultural norms and practices in personality formation and development, but only in the early years of life (Kluckhohn and Murray 1953; Mead 1928, 1930, 1939; Whiting and Child 1953). They did not address the issue of how culture continues to influence personality or behavior into old age. Nor did they deal with the problem of how identity is maintained when one is old. My research addresses both these issues. In addition, it seeks to define and reveal the private means by which individuals select and manipulate cultural goals and norms.[1]

Within the field of psychological anthropology, the subject of identity or self-concept has been addressed most often in studies of acculturation and world view. Psychologically-oriented acculturation research has provided insight into how individuals behave in relation to members, values and institutions of other ethnic groups, and the types

of stress they experience in periods of social change. Recently however, the concept of acculturation has come to be viewed as irrelevant or simplistic in contemporary urban studies, especially those which seek to explain personality dynamics or interpersonal relations among members of different ethnic groups, and the concepts of ethnic identity and situational identity have emerged to provide greater explanatory scope for these processes (Berreman 1972; Bram 1965; DeVos and Romanucci-Ross 1975; Kiefer 1974; Uchendu 1975). Aside from Kiefer's book (1974), which contains much information on aging Japanese-Americans, studies of ethnic or situational identity have not reported on elderly individuals or populations.

Though it does not deal with acculturation, my research describes and defines situational aspects of identity among older people. In the following pages, I will discuss in detail how social and historical circumstances, interpersonal relations, cultural values and other situational factors have contributed to the self-concepts of the elderly.

The concept of world view--the subconscious, unconscious, or nonarticulated cognitive understanding of the social, natural and supernatural universe--was formulated by Redfield (1953) and Hallowell (1955). Both men suggested that each culture creates its own world view and that every world view contains ideas about time, space, nature, the supernatural and other human beings. Also, both maintained that "every world view starts from the man who is the viewer and includes the idea of a self"

(Redfield, 1953:91). Hallowell defined and developed the idea of the self as "culturally-constituted," asserting that one's self-image can be identified only through the culture of which one is a part:

> The nature of the self, considered in its conceptual content, is a culturally identifiable variable. Just as different peoples entertain various beliefs about the nature of the universe, they likewise differ in their ideas about the nature of the self. And, just as we have discovered that notions about the nature of the beings and powers existent in the universe involve assumptions that are directly relevant to an understanding of the behavior of the individual in a given society, we must likewise assume that the individual's self-image and his interpretation of his own experience cannot be divorced from the concept of the self that is characteristic of his society (1955:76).

One of his major contributions to the study of identity is that culture gives the individual the materials with which to construct a self-concept and interpret the relationship of the self to the environment. My use of the identity concept is in this tradition.

The nature of the relationship between personality and aging has been a central issue to social gerontologists over the last three decades. Since traditional personality theorists have not dealt directly with the aging process (Riegel 1959), students of personality and aging have turned to developmental psychology for both theoretical inspiration and research techniques. The general concerns of this discipline--change and continuity studied within the context of the entire life span--have provided the basis for specific research questions in the area of personality and aging.

Though Buhler (1935, 1968), Jung (1933) and Erikson (1959, 1963), laid the theoretical groundwork for a psychology of aging, and more broadly, a psychology of the life cycle, an integrated theory has not emerged and is slow to develop. This is due to the fact that the key questions of change and continuity in adult development remain unanswered: What personality processes are the most relevant to issues of change and continuity at different periods in adulthood and in old age specifically? How can we isolate them? How are these processes related to behavior? My research directly addresses these questions. Using a descriptive method, I will isolate and illustrate the salient issues of identity and aging with respect to development in the lives of several people over 70 and I will discuss the relationship of these issues to behavior patterns.

Another subject of concern to social gerontologists has been the measurement of the passage of time in the individual life. A problem has been to choose appropriate frameworks of measurement--such as calendar time, social time, historical time--and to discover how they interact in the determination of behavior (Lynch 1971; Neugarten and Datan 1973; Neugarten and Peterson 1957; Riegel 1972). There are few studies which report on the subjective experience of time to the elderly. One of my tasks will be to describe how old people organize time as they reflect back on their lives and deal with their current situations and to discuss how the

interpretation of time, especially life periods, influences behavior.

Intimately related to issues of time measurement in gerontology are conceptual and methodological issues involved in the use of chronological age as a key variable in understanding the aging process. Chronological age has been the primary explanatory variable in social science research on aging; Baltes and Willis (1977) note that it is no longer considered the essential variable as it proves to have neither descriptive nor explanatory usefulness. For instance, Wohlwill (1973) and others have shown that individual differences in aging and development are large and take many forms. Many researchers have found that variations in behavior are associated not with age itself, but rather with other factors such as stressful events or cohort effects (Baltes and Willis 1977:142). Indeed, Neugarten has called age an "empty variable," stressing that it is the biological and social events associated with the passage of time, and not merely time itself, which have relevance for the study of personality change (1977:633).

My research findings suggest that not only are the biological and social events that occur with time relevant for the analysis of personality and aging, but, more importantly, it is <u>the ways in which these events are interpreted by individuals in relation to time</u> that have a greater potential for explaining the process of change and continuity in relation to adult personality. One of my aims

in this dissertation is to show how the interpretation of events is a key construct for understanding the relationship between the passage of time and adult development, and to explain why chronological age is not a relevant variable.

Possibly the most important focus for gerontological research has been the relationship of personality to successful adaptation (also termed "morale" and "life satisfaction"). This area of interest gave rise to the major theories in social gerontology in the 1960s (Cumming and Henry 1961; Havighurst et al 1968; Neugarten et al 1968) and continues to be of significant interest. A popular line of inquiry has been the role played by both change and continuity in adaptation. Neugarten (1968), Maddox (1968) and other researchers have proposed that continuity is a key to psychological well-being in old age. Their work and that of their colleagues analyzes continuity in terms of social activity only; it does not elaborate upon the meaning of continuity in the individual life, nor the part played by cultural values, norms and expectations in the maintenance of continuity.

I will attempt to fill this gap by describing, through individual case material, how continuity is created and maintained <u>symbolically</u> in the individual life. I wish to show that though social activities, lifestyles, friendship patterns, living arrangements, health status, etc., may change over the life span, individuals are able to connect and integrate the diverse experiences of a lifetime. In

addition, I will discuss how some old people adapt to new situations by providing themselves with frameworks of understanding within which they may interpret a changing environment and maintain a feeling of oneness about themselves.

A body of theory that contrasts with developmental psychology but which is used as a framework of orientation by a growing number of researchers in the field of gerontology (and anthropology as well) is symbolic interactionism. Students of this school of thought, that originated with G.H. Mead (1934), point out that people are not passive observers and reactors to their surroundings, but that they actively participate in their environment, creating their social reality and sense of self as they engage in community life and as they interpret and evaluate the meaning of their interactions with others. The self-concept grows, changes, and becomes modified as one continues to interpret one's environment and interactions throughout life (Blumer 1969; Garfinkle 1967; Goffman 1959).

Interactionists who have studied aging have emphasized the process of change in adulthood. They view change as the outcome of socialization and situational adjustment, two processes believed to continue throughout the life span (Becker, 1968a, 1968b; Becker and Strauss 1968; Cavan 1962). When considered along with developmental studies, this approach adds considerably to our knowledge of adult development in a social context. Yet, interactionists have not fully confronted the issues of consistency and continuity in the elderly person's

life. Some unanswered questions remain: If one's self-concept is a product of social interaction, how can one preserve a coherent sense of self throughout the life course as the interactions change? How does one construct a sense of self that integrates 70 or more years of diverse experience--a lifetime of communication with a variety of people and participation in different kinds of events? I will show how people create a consistent sense of identity through the creation of unifying symbols in the interpretation of changing situations and ongoing socialization.

This study seeks to bridge the two disciplines and various theoretical perspectives outlined above. In addition, it addresses problems not thoroughly or successfully dealt with by the other approaches. In this dissertation, I propose that people create themes[2] --cognitive areas of meaning--in the construction of their biographies which explain, unify and give substance to their perceptions of who they are and how they see themselves participating in social life. As each life is unique, so too are the themes people create. But all themes are built out of the historical and geographical circumstances in which people find themselves, the flow of ordinary, daily life and the values of society. The construction of themes is a way for individuals to know themselves and explain who they are to others by defining events, experiences and values and making connections among them. The following examples illustrate components of themes

expressed by my informants: "My entire life has been devoted to my law practice." "My family is my life--I am nothing without them." "I spent many years serving the community. I would say the best way to live a good life is to do as much as you can for others." A detailed discussion of themes in the individual life will appear in Chapter Three.

The themes people create as they tell their life stories may be viewed as culturally-based components of identity. The theoretical underpinnings of this proposal are Hallowell's conception of the "culturally-constituted self" and "culturally-constituted behavioral environment" (1955) and G.H. Mead's notion of the self and symbolic interaction (1934).

Mead's contributions to social science are many; his formulations that are most relevant to this research include: 1) The self is a process--it emerges and is formed in the course of symbolic interaction; 2) Symbolic interaction entails <u>definition</u> of other people, actions and situations, and <u>interpretation</u>--determination of the meaning of those actions; 3) The self as process is reflexive, that is, a person can perceive himself, have conceptions about himself and continually evaluate and respond to these conceptions; 4) The individual is able to assume the attitude of the "generalized other." This includes both the attitudes of other people and the characteristics of the social order in general (i.e., religion, politics, etc.). 5) The world consists of objects, including people, which are human products,

socially constructed. That is, objects do not have intrinsic properties; rather they are imbued with identity and value as people act toward them and infer meaning from those actions.

Hallowell states his indebtedness to Mead (1955:86), and his core concepts are clearly influenced by Mead. He defines the "culturally-constituted self" as the reflexive organism, identifiable by the features (language, world view, kinship structure, etc.) of his society. The "culturally-constituted behavioral environment" is determined by the "psychological field" of the individual rather than by external or objective properties. As an anthropologist, Hallowell was concerned with the relationship between individuals and culture; therefore his perspective on and contributions to the study of identity are different from those of Mead. Of most interest to this research are his ability to synthesize the "individual" and "cultural" levels of analysis in his works, and his concern with cultural definitions of the self as a key to understanding behavior (1934, 1936, 1955, 1963).

Mead emphasized the interpretive process itself as critical in the formation and development of the self; Hallowell focused on the analysis of cultural patterns as the tools with which to interpret the self and its environment. My use of the identity concept emerges from these two viewpoints: It is the individual's view of self, constructed from participation in, reflection upon and interpretation of his social and cultural world. The themes one creates are the symbolic means of defining one's relationship to and extracting meaning from one's environment.

I will pay specific attention to two questions: Why do people have the themes that they do? What are the principles that guide people to construct particular themes and thus form a self-concept? In the following analysis, I hope to show that there is no single explanation for the construction of a self-concept (and more broadly, for the construction of reality) just as there is no single, true explanation for the existence and sequence of particular events in a life. The answer to these questions is -- it depends. My task will be to explore the ways in which people create themes depending on 1) their need for coherence and logic in defining and explaining life experience; 2) their need for continuity across the life span; 3) the limitations and opportunities faced at different life periods due to social and historical circumstances; 4) the values of their cultural milieux; and 5) the interpretation of present circumstances, which include social setting, interaction patterns and the impact of conceptions of the past on them.

People construct a self-concept at every age, using these five principles as building blocks. I would like to suggest that these principles are interpreted in different ways, emphasized to different degrees and combined to take on new meanings at different life stages. This dissertation will explore their meaning for people over 70.

Methods

The 60 people chosen to participate in this study do not reside in the same geographic community (though they all live in the same large metropolitan area), nor do they share identical lifestyles. Because the study group is not spatially bounded, isolated or identifiable and also is not socially homogeneous, it cannot be described in terms of such social structural properties as community organization, politics, local institutions, networks, occupational roles or other constructs common to studies in urban anthropology.

However, the members of this study group do share a number of characteristics which prove to be central to the study of cultural factors in identity development: 1) They have been exposed to the same major social trends and national historic events in the United States over an approximately fifty-year period; 2) They share certain dominant American values; 3) They hold similar views about being old and the aging process. These three areas of similarity provide the background for the discussion of identity in this dissertation.

This research is about the organization and interpretation of personal experience, not the organization of social life. I did not study a community and did not observe communal processes. Rather, I met with individuals on a one-to-one basis in their homes for lengthy conversations and observed and participated with them in their daily round, with friends and family, in routine situations, and during periods of celebration, crisis, anxiety, and contentment. Thus, my focus

is on the individual life, its social context, how each person recalls and interprets experience, and the meaning that experience has for him or her.

In the course of my graduate training in medical anthropology and social gerontology, I met and did fieldwork with approximately 150 people over the age of 60. Some of these people I encountered only once or twice; many others I became acquainted with over a two-year period (1975-1977). I got to know about thirty of them quite well.

The people I chose to study for my dissertation research were, with a few exceptions, drawn from this population. Over a nine-month period in 1978 and 1979, I conducted fieldwork among 60 white, middle-class, West Coast, urban Americans over the age of 70. This population represents a range of economic, occupational and educational backgrounds. It also represents a variety of current home environments and conditions of physical health. All 60 people were mentally alert and articulate. I deliberately chose alert, expressive individuals for this project, knowing that I would be talking with them at length. I met with each of the study participants for several hours during the fieldwork period, obtaining data from them on past life experiences, current family and social patterns, daily routine and self-image.

From those 60, I subsequently chose a subsample of 15 people for intensive, systematic interviewing. These 15--from whom I collected detailed life histories--typify the

range of past and present experience of the larger group. The life history interviews ranged from eight to fifteen hours in length, divided into two, three or four sessions. These were tape-recorded, using formal, open-ended schedules and the tapes were later fully transcribed. In addition, I spent many hours with the members of the subsample gathering data informally through participant-observation--meeting families and friends, taking part in social activities and engaging in conversations.

During my visits with the 15 members of the subsample, in addition to tape-recording the stories of their lives, I also recorded many of our conversations covering a range of subjects, from the abstractions of their philosophies of life to the concreteness of mundane, daily tasks. All conversations and interviews, tape-recorded or not, were informal in style; though I asked many questions, and asked most informants the same questions, I never followed a precise preworded questionnaire, nor did I prestructure the sessions. I explained to everyone involved in this research that I was an anthropology student interested in aging and that I wanted to learn something about their histories, what they thought were the important experiences in life, how they would describe themselves, how they felt about growing older and what had been their frustrations, successes, and hopes. I told them that I hoped my findings would contribute to our knowledge of the aging process. No informant was paid to participate in the research.

I tried to place my informants in the role of teacher. I think I was most often put in the role of empathetic acquaintance. For a number of people, I was a confidant. From my viewpoint, and I think from that of my informants as well, our conversations were undertaken in a spirit of friendliness, honesty and enjoyment. Data that I obtained in this manner were spontaneous, thoughtful, and usually self-reflective. Anyone overhearing one of my "interviews" (except another anthropologist) probably would have thought that we were friends carrying on a conversation, or that we were acquaintances, and that I was simply trying to get to know the other person better. This is the context in which I acquired information about identity.

I did not conduct therapeutic interviews; I did not administer projective tests or deliberately elicit fantasy or dream material from my informants. Discussions with informants were not aimed at solving problems or achieving insight, two of the major goals of psychotherapy (Kennedy 1973). Notions of identity most common in the psychology and psychiatry literature were developed from clinical studies on disturbed people and carry with them (implicitly or explicitly) criteria for the definition of both optimal functioning and pathology. My research was not oriented in this way, and my analysis of identity is not grounded in a mental-illness model (Erikson 1963, 1968; Rogers 1959; Sullivan 1953).

Neither were the interviews conducted with a view towards preserving the life history for posterity; it was not "oral history." People did not relate the story of their lives to me in a premeditated, planned or organized manner. I saw no evidence that they were trying to present a unified autobiography or a one-sided, glamorous view of themselves. Instead, our conversations wandered from topic to topic; I did not attempt to impose a form upon our discussions. Subject matter usually changed when I asked a question. Also, people did not talk about their lives in relation to social trends or the times in which they have lived, and I did not ask them to do so. They did not place themselves in a broader, historical context. Thus, my analysis is not from a purely historical perspective (Mandelbaum 1973; Smith 1978), though I will discuss, in Chapter Three, some historical circumstances that pertain to the lives of my informants and influence their current retrospective accounts.

Material I collected was anchored in the occurrences of everyday life and the individual's immediate environment. The life histories were created from accumulated memories and judgments about past and present circumstances within the framework of informants' perceptions of and reactions to me, my specific questions and my general interests. Each autobiography selects, organizes and relates a stream of events that constitutes each person's knowledge of his or her self and his or her life experience.

I decided to use the life history approach for studying the cultural basis of identity for several reasons. First,

the life history reveals subjective experience in its own terms; it is the individual's view of how he or she understands his or her own life (Watson 1976).. Second, the life history is told in a subjectively-defined cultural context, that is, we can see how the individual defines and manipulates cultural symbols by studying the autobiography. Third, through life histories, people "account"[3] for their lives, that is, they make them logical and imbue them with a sense of naturalness and rightness. They select, define, classify and organize experiences in order to construct the reality of their lives and permeate that reality with substance. Through life histories of old people, the investigator may discover which cultural materials have meaning across their life spans and how these materials are interpreted in order for the individual to negotiate his or her circumstances and make them meaningful.

The life history approach does not yield cultural profiles, social norms or types--primary concerns of social and cultural anthropologists. But, more than other anthropological methods, life history studies express the dynamics of individual life experience such as the changing interpretations and meanings of different life stages, types and degrees of adaptation to social pressures, and fluctuations in self-image, attitudes and behavior.

Both anthropologists (Kluckhohn 1945; Langness 1965; Mandelbaum 1973) and gerontologists (Neugarten 1977) have

noted the problems of reliability and validity inherent in such a subjective and retrospective approach and the lack of a coherent, all-encompassing methodology with which to deal with those problems. In my study of the cultural basis of identity, external measures of validity are not critical because I am concerned with eliciting informants' current interpretations of their lives: what they view as the relevant sequence and timing of events, what they perceive to be meaningful experiences, and the way in which they understand their relationship to other individuals and institutions.

I have already noted that chronological age has lost its usefulness as a crucial variable both in explaining individual differences and in building theory in gerontology. It has been noted (Baltes and Willis 1977; Underwood 1975) that other standard demographic variables, such as sex, class, marital status, etc., are also not well-suited to these purposes, and Underwood (1975) suggests that "process" variables are more salient than demographic variables for explaining individual differences and theory building. In my analysis of life histories, I have isolated a specific "process variable" or construct which I have called a theme. In the following pages I will attempt to 1) demonstrate how this construct emerges in life histories and why it cannot appear with survey techniques; and 2) illustrate the ways in which this construct is critical both in the explanation of individual differences and in the broader understanding of the dynamics of adult development.

This dissertation seeks to explore the concept of identity in old age in order to refine and build upon theory in the fields of anthropology and gerontology. The following chapters demonstrate a method for isolating and analyzing cultural components of identity--themes--while addressing the theoretical issues set forth above. First, in Chapter Two, I present the social and historical context in which my informants have lived in order to outline the kinds of factors that unite the members of this study group and provide the background for this discussion of identity. In Chapter Three, I will use material from three life histories to illustrate how themes are created and to show how they provide a method for understanding developmental processes in old age. The aim of Chapter Four is to show how themes are a framework for analyzing the dynamic role of cultural values in individual behavior patterns and the construction of identity. Chapter Five addresses the issues of continuity of identity and meaning of old age to my informants. To conclude, I briefly discuss identity in old age from a cross-cultural perspective.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY GROUP

> I'd enjoy talking with you but I feel a bit guilty and hypocritical. Between the things I've forgotten, the things I've repressed, and the things I will not discuss, there's not much left.
>
> ----91-year old woman

The members of this study group form a broad age cohort. They are not part of a single community; that is, they live in different neighborhoods, and do not share a specific tradition or a common set of beliefs. Aside from several married couples, the people I interviewed generally do not know one another. They do live in one large, urban metropolitan area. At the time fieldwork was conducted, the 60 people ranged in age from 70 to 97, with most between the ages of 70 and 90. They were all born between 1880 and 1908. Most were born in the United States, the children of native-born Americans. Some were raised in the city where they now reside; others have come here from all parts of the country. Ten people were born in Europe. Each of these emigrated to this country before the age of 18. Thus the greater part of the life experience of all study group members has taken place in America.

The View of the Past

The immigrants or children of immigrants share a conscious sense of being American which they contrast with their European heritage. They value their American identity more highly than their European past and they think of themselves as having broken away from that culture and those traditions. For example, one woman said, "I felt American the moment I arrived here. I liked everything immediately. I didn't bring any of the old things with me when I came here. I never wanted to go back to that conservative, traditional life. For the first time, I felt I could be free and be myself."

The son of an immigrant said, "My father was old-school and old-fashioned and he had an accent. I'm much more Americanized than he was. I don't think I have any of his characteristics." A woman who came with her family at the age of 12 said, "I told my mother that I was going to go out and buy a dictionary and learn English, and I did. In three months I learned enough to be in the class with kids my own age...But I was so frustrated, absolutely embarrassed when I mispronounced a word. I had to work awfully hard to get rid of my accent. Boy, did I work hard!"

The majority of the native-born Americans grew up in small towns or cities and have lived in urban areas their whole lives. A few people were born in rural areas and spent their childhoods on farms or ranches. Those with rural backgrounds moved to a city by the time they were 18.

Though all members of the study group are middle-class now, their economic backgrounds vary greatly and have fluctuated over their lifetimes. About one quarter of these people came from affluent homes. Their fathers were in the professions or were successful businessmen; some of their mothers inherited wealth; some had servants in the family household. This is how one woman explained her position in her childhood household: "In my generation, the children were relegated to nurses. I was subjected to a nurse for seven years...I was a spoiled child--a brat. I never had to do anything, and I never learned to do anything because the maids did it all." This typifies several childhood situations.

Another quarter of my informants were quite poor during their youths. Their fathers had unsuccessful business ventures or struggled with farming. These people had specific duties and jobs to perform in the household from a very early age and felt a strong responsibility to contribute to the family welfare. One man who grew up on a farm said, "My father died when I was 15. From then on I was the main support of my mother. I was going to school and I worked on the farm too. In those days, I worked very hard." A woman from a large, poor family related, "I had to help my mother do everything from when I was very young. I remember beating the rugs...and she held me out the windows while I washed them...When I was a little older I would take care of all the children in the neighborhood to earn money."

Half of my informants grew up in middle-class households. They had no financial responsibilities to their families and their accounts of childhood and young adulthood reflect this--they focus mainly on school experiences, friendships, recreational activities, part-time jobs and relationships with family members.

One typical reflection back to youth came from a woman with a middle-class background: "The high school years were some of the happiest years of my life. We had a nice group of friends, we did everything together, shared everything... And life proceeded. We graduated from high school and went to college. We were supposed to earn a living and we did..." A man whose parents were professionals summed up his childhood thus, "During my childhood I was a big profiteer. I had a paper route, bought them for ten cents and sold them for fifteen cents...Then I joined the Boy Scouts and had a lot of fun with that." Another woman stated, "I had a gang in grade school...I was ambitious. I got good grades and worked hard and so forth. One time I wrote a speech and won a prize... and there were lots of parties then..." These descriptions exemplify the childhood experiences of at least half the members of the study group.

All 60 participants grew up in nuclear family households. A few people lost a father during childhood; a few others experienced their parents' divorce. Most people had siblings; only one person had more than four siblings. Half of these people grew up in the town where grandparents and other relatives

lived. They knew their grandparents well and saw them frequently. The others never met or did not know extended kin too well primarily because they did not reside nearby.

Memories of and attitudes toward parents reflect something of the quality of family life among this group. Descriptions of parents are remarkably consistent. Mothers were described as "pious," "charitable," "remarkable," "active," "gorgeous," "brilliant," "very good," "devoted," and "perfect." Without exception, mothers are remembered in superlative terms, and they embody all the positive values of the culture and the times in which my informants grew up.

Fathers, on the other hand, were not described in as much detail or in such a positive way. They were "ordinary," or "not there very much." Memories of them generally are not as vivid and not invested with emotion as are memories of mothers. Some typical remarks about fathers were: "He didn't communicate," "He didn't tolerate children," and "He was cool towards me."

In retrospective accounts, these people idealize their mothers and recall having close relationships with them. By and large, fathers are remembered as emotionally-distant--"I didn't know him too well"--and not worth emulating--"He was uneducated," and "He strayed from the beaten path." Mothers provided both the moral and physical backbone of family life. Fathers came and went, and are not thought of by these people in terms of a positive contribution to family life.

Over half these people moved at least twice during their youths. Some emigrated to this country and then, several years later, relocated. Some moved within a state; others moved across the country. This mobility was due to fathers' occupational requirements. Moves to a different town were for the purpose of starting a new business. Those who were raised in rural areas relocated to find better farming conditions.

Two-thirds of this group attended college. Some attended professional school as well. Education was a primary value in most people's families while they were growing up. Descriptions of childhood dwell at length on the need to do well in school, fears of disappointing parents with bad grades, frustration at academic failure, and the sense of achievement with academic success. Only a few people did not finish high school. Except for one person who quit school because she "just didn't like it," those who did not finish high school were forced to work to support themselves.

Religious upbringing among my informants varied greatly in kind and degree. No one religion dominates in this group; Catholicism, Judaism and a variety of Protestant denominations are represented. About one-third of these people were raised in very religious households. For them, religion permeated all facets of youth and was one of the strongest factors in childhood socialization. It served as the guide to proper behavior. One man said, "I was raised a strict Calvinist. My mother embraced that rather uninviting religion and pushed

it off onto me. I was scared to death by it...I was pretty square. This Calvinism included the idea that dancing and other things were of course very sinful. So I didn't do them." A woman said, "I was raised Catholic. And I took it very seriously. We had to go to church before we went to school in the mornings. Nobody would wake me up and I became a nervous wreck training to wake myself up, so I had time to go to church. That's why I became pretty anxious and nervous." These two people and most of the others with strict religious upbringings rejected their religions shortly after they left home. They now consider themselves agnostics or atheists. Only a few people who were raised in very religious households consider themselves quite religious at present.

Approximately one-third of the study population was raised in what may be called moderately religious households. This group includes Christian Scientists, Jews, Baptists and Protestants. These people studied the Bible as children, attended Sunday school for varying lengths of time, and went to church regularly or occasionally with their families. The rest of the study participants were raised in non-religious households.

Though there are a few who consider themselves quite religious now and participate regularly in the rituals of their faith, the study group as a whole is not religious. For the most part, they identify themselves as Jews or Christians, but the organized practices of their faiths hold no special meaning for them and they attend church or synagogue infrequently, if at all.

Aside from several women who were never employed, all research participants entered the labor market when their formal educations ended. Many were earning money on a part-time basis while they were still in school. The jobs they held vary widely. About two-thirds of the men were in business; the others were in the professions. Most of the women did office work--accounting, bookkeeping, secretarial, clerical--for at least a part of their occupational lives. A few were teachers; one was in business. Some of the women were very active in their communities, especially during the years of the Second World War, and they worked as volunteers for church groups, schools, the Red Cross and other community organizations. Half of these people built a profession or a business over a lifetime; most of them have resided in this urban metropolitan area since they began working as young adults. The others changed jobs at least twice over the years, either when they relocated or when the needs of their families changed.

Attitudes toward occupations among this study group cannot easily be summarized. For about half, work was something that had to be done and it never provided much satisfaction. Other aspects of life such as family relations or friendships held much more meaning. For others, especially those with professions, the work role was and still is the primary means of identification and occupational achievements were and are the main source of gratification and positive self-esteem.

Those who were heavily invested in their occupations defined the successes and failures in their lives in terms of their jobs and described themselves in terms of occupational roles and work habits. Often the influential people in their lives were professional mentors or peers. I asked a 78-year old semi-retired lawyer to describe what he was like at the height of his career. He replied, "I was very busy. I did a lot of night work, weekend work. Was very dedicated to my practice, which I enjoyed...I had a lot of fire and ambition. That's about all I could say for myself." This man still goes to the office daily, though his work load does not require it, because the continuation of his professional affiliation means more to him than participation in any other activity.

His total and ongoing identification with his profession is in marked contrast to that of another man who was in public relations for 30 years. At age 72 this man said, "I could have hung onto my job a little longer if I had wanted, but I was 65, and decided to knock it off. It would have been economically advantageous if I had hung on a little bit longer I guess. But I wanted to do other things. See, I always considered myself an actor, but I never was willing or had the nerve enough at certain junctures to do it. I still have some ambitions to be an actor, and since I retired I can devote time to it." This man never saw himself in terms of his work role and his career did not dominate his life. His occupation was not mentioned when he discussed the important people or events in his life. He currently derives

great pleasure from and spends much time participating in a neighborhood theater group. These contrasting opinions represent the extremes in attitudes toward work held by my informants.

Most other people hold attitudes toward their occupations that fall between these two points of view. By and large, they took their jobs seriously and were conscientious workers but they now view work in a limited context and put occupational roles in the broader perspective of a lifetime of other kinds of experience.

For the most part, this study group is apolitical, that is, these people generally did not participate in organizations dealing either with local or national political issues. And, their personal goals and values were not connected with the political arena. One woman who was involved in politics in the 1930s and 1940s summarized her commitment thus: "I was very much interested in politics, and spent a lot of time on that. And had some problems with it too, because I knew many radicals and was myself quite radical. It eventually became a hazard...Once I was drawn into planning a paper for the Board of Education and it was contrary to their very conservative hopes and plans...I was branded by the un-American Committee as Red." She is the most politically-oriented person in this population. Most people did not mention political issues or concerns as they talked about their lives.

Though not active in politics, these people are politically-aware. As a group they have kept abreast of the

political and social issues facing their communities and country since they were young adults. They are service-oriented and place high value on "helping others," yet they have channelled their social commitments into organizations and services that are not political.

All participants in this research except one married. About one-quarter of the study population married twice; several people married three times. Of those who remarried, some were widowed in middle age; others were divorced. About one-fourth of the group obtained divorces; two people divorced twice. Another quarter was widowed; two people were widowed twice. At the time fieldwork was conducted, half the participants were married and living with their spouses. With few exceptions, the age at first marriage was 21 to 25.

Only a few of the people who married did not have children; the rest had at least one child. More than half had two children. Only a few people had more than two children. With one exception--a woman who was the sole support of her child--the women were primarily housewives while their children were young. All started or returned to careers, jobs, or active community work by the time their children entered their teens. The men, though not participating much in the day-to-day aspects of childrearing, enjoyed their children, felt close to them while they were growing up, and have fond memories of the childrearing years. Only one man stated that he ignored his children. He said, "I never noticed my children. I didn't pay any attention to them 'til they were about 12. I

was more interested in business and golf." He is the only member of the study group to whom family life was unimportant.

When the women told me about their lives, the childrearing years never dominated their discussions; the role of mother was never prominent in their retrospective accounts. Maintenance of family emerges as a dominant value for all informants, but specific events concerning childrearing and the process itself are not of prime significance to these women now when they discuss who they are and how they have spent time. They see themselves as having a variety of roles and being multi-faceted people, even during the childrearing years. Relationships with husbands and friends, the development of character traits and successes and frustrations in the larger social world play a greater part in their life stories than do childrearing and family life.

Some people helped raise grandchildren for a number of years; they have strong emotional bonds with their grandchildren at present. Remarks which express these close relationships include, "I'd rather be around my grandchildren than other people. They are more fun to be with," and "I enjoy the company of my grandchildren. I feel akin to them."

Now, family ties are more important than any others. When asked who they felt closest to, they mentioned, without exception, children and, where they exist, grandchildren. Most people live in the same city as children and grandchildren and see them frequently and regularly. Their families form their support networks as they help with occasional household

chores and errands, transportation, estate planning, and/or business and health matters. Those with children in another city all report that they feel very close to them and visit with them regularly, though for some the visits are once a year at most.

Historical Framework

The main historical events in the lives of my informants were World War I, the Depression and World War II. For the most part, these events are not seen by study group members as determinants of lifecourse decisions or as explanations for personal behavior patterns. To be sure, they felt the impact of the Depression as most struggled financially during this period, and they were affected to differing degress by both world wars, depending upon their personal values, political beliefs, and whether or not they served in the armed forces or participated in war-related service activities. The two wars and the Depression serve as the larger historical backdrop or framework within which people carried on their lives. These events, in and of themselves, are not felt to be personally significant to the majority of these people. The reason for this is due at least in part to the age of this cohort as it passed through these three events.

In 1914, most research participants were between 6 and 19 years of age. Those who were young children simply do not have much recollection of the First World War. A few people remember that their fathers or olders brothers were

away fighting in this war, yet this connection with the event did not have very much personal impact.

Some, who were 18-20 during the First World War years, terminated their educations and went out to work. They speak of this as an enjoyable time in their lives, filled with the excitement of first independence. One woman said, "I was offered this job right out of high school because I knew accounting and their credit manager was drafted--they were desperate. And I had fun. I used to go to the different big companies and train the girls. My first time away from home and I stayed in a hotel all by myself. At 18, I was a bigshot." Another woman said, "I was studying to get into college, but when the First World War came along I stopped school and took a business course. I knew I could get a job and make a lot of money. I got a job with a shipbuilding company and I worked there three and a half years, until the war was over and they got rid of their equipment and everything. Met my first boyfriend at that time. And made a nice group of friends. We had a good time together."

Older people, those in their 20s and 30s during the war, had already started in business or the professions or were continuing their educations. Some were drafted, some were not; in either case, the war is not mentioned at all in their accounts of this period in their lives.

In 1929, most study group members were in their 20s and early 30s. When I asked people to tell me about those years, very few replied in terms of the Depression itself; none

spoke of extreme personal hardship. People made comments such as, "Everyone was tightening belts all over the place." Retrospectively, the Depression is viewed in general, rather than specific or personal terms.

Only two people interviewed felt that the Depression influenced the direction of their own lives. One woman was starting her own business in the early 1930s. She spoke of that time: "We started in the Depression on borrowed money. Jobs we were promised--gone. And I used to wake up about four o'clock in the morning terrified. I knew I wouldn't starve, but here I was with the rent to pay and no visible means of income. So I took to prayer. And that quieted me, calmed me, and I began to feel normal." Due to financial worries, this woman became religious, and she has remained deeply religious to this day. Her business grew during the Depression and was quite successful later. Another woman views the Depression as one link in a chain of reasons why she did not find an interesting occupation for herself. She stated: "After college I went into a very dull clerical job. When I married and came here, it was the Depression, and there was no chance of jobs at that time. And then when there were more coming, I just didn't seem to have any drive to do anything about it..."

Many men, and husbands of women in the group, were financially quite comfortable during the Depression years; their businesses or professions were doing well. One representative comment about those years is from a man who

was in his late 20s when the Depression started and had been in business about five years: "I had a good job and I was ambitious. I was going up the ladder. At no time during the Depression did I make less than $50 a week. And that was a hellava lot of money then." He, and quite a few others from this group, were in businesses that were growing during the 1930s, or had jobs that were not severely affected by the dire economic conditions in the country.

During World War II, the majority of these people were in their 30s and 40s. Only a few of the men were drafted or enlisted in the armed forces and fought abroad. For only one of these men who fought in Europe does the war stand out as a critical time in life, a time of extreme crisis that had to be reckoned with personally. He said, "The war was a great crash in my life. I had to become involved because I was in danger. I had to fight fascism for myself and my family. I couldn't ask others to do it for me. It's hard to explain the whole Hitler terror...our lives were actually in danger. This was a matter of life and death." This man's retrospective response to World War II is unique among this group.

The women generally do not mention the war years as such when discussing their pasts. One exception is a woman whose whole life has been devoted to community service. She was very active with the Red Cross and Armed Services during the war, and she discussed the activities of this time in her life--her "war work"--in great detail: "...They set up a

message service center. And the Army forgot to feed the boys. So there I go again. I called up five or six friends, and told them to get sandwiches together and coffee, and in no time people just came pouring in with food...it came pouring in so fast, that I had to call up the different military places. They sent their wagons and took it away...After awhile I asked someone else to take that over, 'cause I organized an entertainment service. I got in touch with the special service officers at the Army and Navy...Before we finished we had twenty night clubs going and entertainment at twenty-seven hospitals." This woman speaks of "serving the war." She is the only informant who does so.

Many of these people did not have their lives disrupted by the war in any way; they kept their jobs and their personal lives proceeded as in peace time. Some relocated or changed jobs during or shortly after the war as new opportunities and situations arose. They mention the war only as a point of reference in time, not as an effective agent in their lives. For instance one man said, "I had the opportunity to change medical fields right after the war, so I did, as I wasn't happy with what I had been doing." Another man stated, "I finally sold the business during the war, and was able to go full-time into public service work."

Besides the fact of the two world wars and the Depression, Americans over 70 have lived through many trends, fads and innovations which have profoundly altered the fabric of social life. The lengthy list includes such important arrivals as

the automobile, air and space travel, the automation of industry and agriculture, the implementation of social security, radical changes in sexual mores and childrearing patterns, the creation of suburbia, and the concept of the environment as something which can be threatened. As with wars and economic crises, social trends and advances in technology do not figure as main protagonists in the autobiographical accounts of my informants. They are well aware of the vast changes they have lived through and could certainly talk about them if asked. The point I wish to make is that national developments affecting social life are not viewed as integral to the life history; people are not conscious of these things having a personal impact.

My informants do not set their autobiographies on the stage of history, neither do they view themselves as makers of history (Kiefer 1974:49-81). Perhaps only those whose lives have been drastically interrupted or permanently altered by larger historical processes which they can identify (for example, survivors of the Holocaust, prisoners of war, boat people of Southeast Asia) can perceive themselves as actors in and products of historical circumstances.

Another possible reason for the lack of historical context in the life stories I collected is that now, when presenting their autobiographies, my informants are <u>out</u> of history. I have already noted that the life history yields one's <u>current interpretation</u> of reality: though people reflect back on their lives, their retrospective accounts are structured

by present circumstances and not by historical factors. This may explain why historical events and social trends are not recalled as pivotal forces by individuals.

The Present

As mentioned earlier, half the study group members were married and living with their spouses at the time fieldwork was conducted. One quarter of my informants live alone; the other quarter live in long-term care facilities. One person interviewed has her own apartment in a retirement residence complex.

Aside from those individuals who are institutionalized, every person interviewed owns his or her home. Most live in single-family dwellings. A few live in condominiums; a few reside in duplexes. Several people also own a vacation home or cottage out of town. All of them owned their homes for at least twelve years before I met them; most have owned their homes twenty years or more.

Two-thirds of the study population considered themselves to be in good health during the fieldwork period. Many have some health problems that prevent them from leading as full a life as they would like--for instance, several are quite hard of hearing, one is blind, some tire very easily and cannot walk much or walk laboriously with canes, some have trouble with arthritis or muscular pain, others have heart problems--but nevertheless, they have adapted to their specific physical situations and continue to lead active, rich

lives in spite of certain limitations. When discussing their routines and activities with me, they never mentioned their health. It was discussed only if I asked about it. As with younger people, the good health of these people is taken for granted and does not arise spontaneously as a topic of conversation.

Those who are institutionalized and some of the other people interviewed lead moderately restricted lives. Although none is bedridden, chronic health problems or a general feeling of weakness or fatigue prevent them from being as active as they once were and would still like to be. Their physical health limits their daily routine and choice of activities and this causes varying degrees of frustration. Several people are restricted in their pursuits by the poor health status of a spouse.

A 92-year old woman considers herself to be in fairly good health. She is restricted by both her bedridden husband and her own lack of energy. She described her routine in relation to these limitations:

> I 'm ambulatory and I drive a car. In the morning I do the household marketing and the family cooking. These two occupations are the most I can undertake as I tire so easily. But in relation to some of my contemporaries, I realize how fortunate I am to be able to function as I do. I conduct two classes still and have people in to visit...But the late afternoon drags on slowly until it's time to prepare dinner. I'm glad for this as it's time-consuming. I'm housebound in part because of my husband. I'm fortunate that I can have the nurses, but I'm still 'on call' some of the time. My daughter says, 'Why don't you go out more?' But I can't walk any appreciable distance. Recently, when I went to the park, I was so exhausted that I decided such outings were no longer in the cards.

An 82-year old woman who lives alone considers herself a "semi-invalid." She described her activity level to me:

> With my heart and other problems, I have to take care. I don't drive anymore and I don't dare take walks since I fell. I have a driver twice a week. I go to very few social events. At a party the other night, I got dizzy and had to go home after half an hour...Most of my life now is involved in just keeping going. I'm taking medication for this and for that; I have to rest a lot. I don't travel anymore--I'm not interested. I won't go very many places. I'm more comfortable in my own apartment...I saw my doctor a couple of weeks ago. I told him I was getting awfully tired of all this jazz. I know the future is not going to be too long.

The restricted lives led by these two women are typical of about twenty members of this group.

The type of activities engaged in by my informants varies only somewhat. Those with lifelong interests and hobbies continue to pursue them as health permits. Those to whom occupation or avocation was a main source of fulfillment still work, mostly on a part-time basis. One-third of the group attend adult education classes. The courses of interest to the greatest number include yoga, photography, creative writing and art practice or appreciation. All these people read a great deal. Many swim and take walks regularly. Many go to movies and theater or ballet frequently. Some watch sports and other programs on television. Some garden and some play cards. Most are quite sociable and enjoy spending time with friends going to restaurants for dinner, to the theater, or playing cards. Only a few are actively involved with church groups, local community organizations or clubs.

All of them spend their time <u>doing</u> things. They enjoy being busy, and like to fill their days with activities that

have meaning and purpose. Those whose health restricts them from doing what they would like, or as much as they would like, are somewhat frustrated and feel the days are "empty" "too long" or "no good."

I asked people to describe a "typical day" for me. Their responses illustrate the range of activities pursued and emphasize the common values of productivity and achievement. The two following examples are representative of the "typical day" of others in terms of the kinds of activities that comprise the daily routine. They illustrate the two dominant attitudes in the study group toward that routine: the first is a man who does as he pleases, is not limited by his health, and loves his lifestyle; the second is a woman whose choices are quite restricted by her failing health, and who is bored.

A 78-year old man in excellent health spends his time as he desires. He lives with his wife whose health is not as good as his and is therefore less active, but this does not impinge upon him or influence his decisions too much. He said:

> I awaken about seven o'clock and put on the earphones and listen to the news. I get up before eight and take a shower and shave and dress. Then come downstairs and get the paper, and get breakfast ready for my wife and myself. Read the news. After breakfast I clean up a little bit, then I usually come up here and putter around this desk, write letters, do a little research. I check the mail, and try to be through here around noon. Then we have lunch. In the afternoon we usually go out--might go downtown, might go to the park, might go to the yacht club and check the boat. Occasionally visit somebody. Do the shopping. Go home about five o'clock and make a fire. Then turn on the news about six and finish about eight. Have a couple of cocktails while we watch the news. Then get the dinner ready, and we have a nice dinner. After that, there might be a TV program, somebody

> might come over, or we might go out to dinner with friends like we did last night...In the week, we'll also garden and do other things. I have a full day. I don't have any time when I sit down and say, "What do I do next?'

An 81-year old woman has her own small apartment in a retirement residence. Her poor health limits her opportunities greatly. She feels quite isolated and is frustrated by the restrictions her fragility imposes upon her. She described her day:

> It's very difficult to get up in the morning because of this emphysema and heart condition. So I make myself get out of bed, try to make it at 6:30. I'll use the bathroom and dress. Sitting down every five minutes it seems to me to catch my breath. Then I go down to breakfast, try not to talk, begin to feel I'm catching my breath. I come upstairs about 8:00, and read the paper. After the paper I get up and empty my waste paper basket, maybe make a phone call. Then do a little studying, reading. And suddenly, it's lunchtime. After lunch, we gather around the mailboxes--a big event--then I come up and read my mail. By that time, I'm awfully sleepy and I take a nap. This brings me to about 3:30. So...I can sit and look out the window for a long time. I'll read a little bit, file my nails, take a walk if the weather's good. Yesterday, I had my hair done. Or there's doctor appointments. We change clothes for dinner. We like it. It's a pleasant aspect. I'll meet someone for dinner downstairs, 5:15. I like an early dinner. After, generally, I come up and watch the news, take my bath and settle down to reading--light junk so you don't get too tense. (laughs) Now there's a day for you. No good. Boring. I'll fill it with anything I can that keeps me busy...I'm going to have to give up my car soon because my eyes are so bad. It's the illusion of independence I feel I'm giving up...It's a terrible ending to live so long without having something specific to do, or being needed.

Reading, television, the household chores, walking, socializing--these are the events around which many of these people's days are structured. What people do, the activities in and of themselves, do not determine the level of satisfaction

with one's routine. Rather, the determining factor seems to be the knowledge that one is doing what one wants, or that one would be doing more things or other kinds of things if one had better health and more energy.

Current friendship patterns among this group are determined primarily by four factors: 1) geographic mobility, 2) the high value placed on relationships with family members, 3) lifestyle, and 4) age.

About half the people interviewed have resided in this urban metropolitan area since their young adulthood. Most of them have a few "lifelong friends" who have lived in this area for most of their lives as well. Because both research participants and the people they know have been mobile, they have made friends in different places over the years; these now are dispersed widely across the country. Many people correspond with old friends and take trips to visit them occasionally. The few people bemoan the fact that they have no close friends living nearby or that old friends have moved away recently and it is too difficult to maintain intimate long-distance relationships.

As I discussed earlier, family ties are the most important. Family members, especially children and grandchildren, are the primary givers of emotional support, financial aid, and household help. But above and beyond the support network function, kin are the closest friends for the majority of these people. A few people interviewed without family say they have no close friends, and they feel a gap in their lives regarding intimate relationships.

Since family members provide the most intimacy and support for this group, friends play a different role, largely that of companion. Friends are those who share lifestyle and interests, whether professional or recreational. About one quarter of the group mention long-term business associates or professional colleagues as closest friends. Most people have at least one close friend from high school, college or the young adulthood period in general. Many have close friends from participating over the years in clubs, church groups or community organizations. For all informants, "close" friends are those one has known and shared life experiences with for at least twenty years.

Quite a few people mention the fact that they have outlived many or most of their friends and this saddens them greatly. All of those who discuss this issue state that one does not make close friends when one is old. They feel that friendships depend upon building a life together, looking forward to the future and sharing expectations. When one is old, there is no future, few expectations, and thus no basis for the creation of friendships. An 81-year old woman summarized the feelings of many on this subject when she explained:

> ...the friends I've made recently I consider very much on the surface. When you're older, you don't go deep into friendship. You aren't relying on them in the sense that you did at 35 or 40...What do you hear from any of us? My family, my children, my grandchildren--that's all you hear. You have no place to grow together. When you're younger you do. You're educating your children, having a social life with your husband...When you're older, you've heard it all before...and anyway, what more is there to say?

About half of my informants specifically express satisfaction with both the number of friends they have now and the degree of closeness in those relationships. Another quarter state that they miss or need a close relationship with one person--a best friend. A 74-year old man who lives alone said: "I wish there was someone around I could shoot the breeze with, and go traveling with. That's all I need." An 82-two year old widow stated: "I know lots of people and I like them all. But I wish there was someone who lived nearby--a neighbor--for sharing and support."

Activity and productivity in the daily routine, intimacy with and support from family, sharing one's life with friends--these are the most meaningful things to these people, the areas in which they place the highest value. My informants also share some areas of concern. Many people fear senility, or loss of their mental faculties, above all else. Many worry about losing their independence--"not to be able to drive a car, or something like that"--and becoming dependent on others to meet their daily needs. A few people fear the death of a spouse before their own; some others worry about the health of children or grandchildren. Several people mention inflation as their greatest present fear; they worry that the cost of living will deplete their savings before they die. A few people are most concerned about the economic and political developments in the country rather than any personal or familial state of affairs.

When I asked, "What do you look forward to now?", the answer I received, almost without exception, was some variation

of this: "There is nothing to look forward to now. I just live from day to day." Many people said they have done all they wanted to do in life; they have no unfinished business, no burning desire to do more. A 70-year old man summarized the attitude of most people toward the future: "I don't have a plan to become anything now. I can't at my age. I just don't think in those terms." And the comments about the future from a 92-year old woman typify others: "I don't want to live much longer. It seems that I've had the best that life can give me, already. What else could it give me? I mean, you enjoy your grandchildren. You see their successes. But that's not your own life." An 80-year old woman said: "This is the end of the line, the finish. But what worries me is that it could go on a lot longer than I think."

Although the ages in this study group span twenty-seven years, from 70 to 97, the vast majority, even those in their early 70s, do not think in terms of the future, do not make long-range plans, and assume their own future to be short.

3. THEMES AND THE LIFE HISTORY

> Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. When that happens it is possible, in some pictures, to see the original lines: a tree will show through a woman's dress, a child makes way for a dog, a large boat is no longer on an open sea. That is called pentimento because the painter 'repented,' changed his mind. Perhaps it would be as well to say that the old conception, replaced by a later choice, is a way of seeing and then seeing again...The paint has aged now and I wanted to see what was there for me once, what is there for me now.
>
> ----Lillian Hellman

In his delineation of eight stages of the life cycle, Erikson (1963) formulated the process by which identity grows and expands through the crises faced and choices made by the developing ego. His stages--basic trust vs. basic mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, identity vs. role confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, and ego integrity vs. despair--offer researchers in aging the only full-scale model for studying the dynamics of identity continuity and change throughout the entire life span. Yet Erikson does not present case material to elaborate the last two stages--generativity vs. stagnation and ego integrity vs. despair--which are, according to his model, the central concerns of maturity and old age respectively. But Erikson's developmental perspective does concentrate on the explication of growth, continuity and the integration of "ego qualities," of which identity is one (1963:246), as the individual ages. The contrasting model

developed by the interactionists and outlined in Chapter One focuses on the processes of change, adjustment and socialization, and a number of researchers have viewed aging in terms of these processes.

In the chapters that follow, I seek to bridge these two perspectives and thus broaden the identity concept by exploring the relationship of constructs set forth by Erikson and the interactionists. For example, the issues of intimacy, generativity, integrity and situational adjustment are all especially relevant to my informants as they talk about their lives. The ways in which these issues intertwine and emerge as sources of frustration or satisfaction will be described first through the presentation and discussion of themes in the individual life and later in a discussion of developmental tasks. I will attempt to show that themes people create are the means by which they interpret and evaluate their life experiences and attempt to integrate these experiences to form a self-concept.

In this chapter, I will illustrate first, by discussing the themes three people have created, how they have formulated their self-concepts. Second, I will supplement the autobiographical material with some contextual information about their particular social backgrounds. Third, I will talk about these cases in terms of developmental and interactionist theory.

Each individual's thematic repertoire is unique, as is each autobiography. Because of this, one person's themes cannot be typical of the group. I have chosen three cases

from the subsample of 15 to illustrate a variety of attitudes, personal histories, current living arrangements, and approaches to interpreting one's autobiography. The range of themes in the 15 cases is enormous; in addition, the themes are not, in most cases, directly comparable. I have chosen, for the sake of brevity and cohesion, to present only three of the 15 cases. I feel that three are sufficient to illustrate what constitutes a theme in the first place, how themes contribute to the formation of identity, and the diversity of themes in the entire subsample.

I have not presented the autobiographical material as it was related to me. Instead, in the three case studies which follow, I have organized the life stories first, by theme, second, by information about the informants' historical period and third, by developmental issues. I must emphasize here that the concept of theme emerged after I collected, and then studied, over half of the in-depth life histories. In my analysis of the 15 cases that comprise the subsample, I treated the life histories as literary texts to be penetrated,[1] rather than as "supplementary data" to larger cultural configurations or "illustrative" material in the study of a social group. I derived the themes from several readings of each verbatim transcript of the tape-recorded life history interviews. Working within the texts, I noted and coded 1) repetition of specific words, use of language and general thought patterns, 2) the structure of the overall life history, and 3) the subject matter which dominated the autobiographies as well as that which rarely or never arose in discussions.

Data gathered by participant-observation were supplementary; they added information and provided, in some instances, either verification or contradiction of the texts.

I tried to approach each life history afresh; that is, I did not wish to deliberately seek out a theme in one history that I had just discovered in another. In this way, I attempted to preserve the wholeness and uniqueness of each text and also express the informant's own interpretation of his or her life.

Millie[2]

Millie is 80 years old. She had been living in a nursing home for about a year before I met her, long enough to recover from the trauma of being institutionalized, feel comfortable with the routine and personnel of the place, make some decisions about how she would deal with her new life, and act on them. The first time I walked into the Home and stood in the doorway surveying the large lounge area, she spotted me, said, "Hello, Who are you? What are you doing here?" and proceeded to chat with me easily about various things. I soon realized that she was one of the most friendly, outgoing, and lively people in this large facility. Her eyes shine with enthusiasm for life and she is quick to laugh. These features make her an attractive-looking woman. Though she looks hardy and robust, she is rather unsteady physically, walks laboriously with a cane, struggles to sit and stand, and needs help when dressing and bathing. She never discusses her infirmities, ignores the limitations they place upon her, and is as active as she can be.

The major category of experience that Millie has created to explain herself and her life to me is the nature of personal relationships. Discussions of the quality and quantity of these ties are the most meaningful way for her to describe who she is, how she has gotten along in the world throughout her life and how she understands events that take place around her. Most of our conversations over an eight-month period centered around her relationships with people both in her past and at the present time.

All the people who come into her life are viewed in terms of the emotional connection they have with her. She "likes" or "dislikes," "is attached to," "cares for," or "loves" everyone with whom she comes into contact. A strong need for affection dominates her interactions and her thinking process, and she is fully aware of this. She uses the word "attach" repeatedly: "I grew very attached to him and he to me," "We developed an attachment for one another." "I am so attached to her." "Love" is another frequently used word in her vocabulary: "I love her and she loves me," and "We love one another," are phrases she uses often.

She divides people into two groups--a division based on the type of emotional commitment others convey to her. There are "family," those whose love and caring one can count on, and then there are "strangers," those whose affective attachment to herself is not reliable or long-lasting. The qualities in people that are important to her are those that family members are supposed to have such as loyalty, sincerity, attentiveness. Millie measures the worth of all relationships in terms of these qualities. She wants and needs all people

with whom she comes into contact, regardless of role, to have these qualities, and she is very disappointed when she finds out that this is not the case. In addition, she expects everyone in her world to have an emotional commitment to her and to think about her.

The people with whom she interacts most frequently now are the nurses, aides, volunteers and other residents in the institution and she talks about them in terms of whether or not, and how much, they care for her and are "attached" to her. She makes herself extremely vulnerable by expecting each interaction to be of a loving character. When an aid hurriedly hands her the breakfast tray, and says nothing, Millie feels betrayed. As far as she is concerned, the aide is not treating her as she should, that is, with love, respect and devotion.

When she meets someone at the Home and develops a nodding acquaintance, she speaks of "liking" that person (for instance a volunteer or the man who delivers mail). After a brief time, this "liking" generally becomes "being attached." She creates a pattern of interpersonal relations in which a positive response to someone new in her life is turned into a relationship of reciprocal emotional commitment. She thus sets herself up for frequent disappointment.

From her earliest childhood memories, nothing stands out so importantly as the need to develop, maintain and express close, emotional ties: "My mother cherished me...I adored my father and he clung to me...I adored my principal. I'll never forget him...I was attached to the other children in the neighborhood...I took care of all of them." Later, "I loved

my piano teacher and felt so close to her." Her life history does not contain many descriptions of the character traits of others. She sees other people primarily in terms of their affective relationship with herself.

Indeed, she often explains other people's behavior in terms of whether or not, and to what extent, they are close to her. For example, "My daughter left me," states the relevant aspect of this child's move to another city. Millie interprets this as a personal loss; by moving, the daughter temporarily severed her end of the emotional commitment. And then, "My son is moving out here to be near me." This is the only causal reason given for this act though Millie does discuss his job change and other particulars about the move. The importance of it is clearly in the personal gain it represents.

The characterization of people by their ties to her is taken to its most extreme in the way she views her current best friend. In Millie's descriptions of K., K. has no independent character traits at all. She is represented as existing only in relation to Millie, as tied to her, not as an autonomous human being. This is not to say that if pressed, Millie would be unable to describe K. as a person, but the point I wish to make is that her "uncritical attitude" (Watson 1976:120) stresses the ties rather than the individual personalities in her world. When I first asked Millie about K. she stated: "Without me, she's lost. I put her in her place; I bawl her out...K. is true-blue. E. tried to take her away from me, but she wouldn't sit by E. unless I sat with her." K. is an extension of Millie; Millie tells her what to do and knows that K. would not act without her approval.

Besides describing other people in terms of their bond with her, Millie describes herself only in relation to other people--in terms of the quality of her feelings about the people she knows, and in terms of her perceptions of others' feelings toward her. When I asked her to describe herself now, she pondered for a few minutes and then replied, "I love them all here, I love the way they feel about me, the attention. I know it's real and sincere, and I'm sincere, I'm a very lovable and affectionate person."

In the Home now, Millie creates a world in which--at least in form--emotional commitments abound. For example, when she meets someone walking down the hall, she frequently stops and says, "Hello darling, How are you today? How did you sleep last night? I love you." This often elicits the response, I'm fine thank you; I love you too." At this, Millie smiles, is obviously pleased with the encounter, and walks on. Many times she introduced me to an aide saying, "Sharon, I'd like you to meet _____; we've become very attached to one another haven't we?" And the aide can only respond, "Yes, we have." Millie sets up these interactions in a way that affirms her sense of self as a lovable person.

She engages in other behavior which affirms the lovable self as well. Several examples will illustrate this. A roommate with whom she was getting along badly mentioned that she tore her skirt. Millie offered to mend it. According to Millie, after it was repaired the roommate replied: "You're the dearest person I know. I adore you. I love you. Please don't leave me." Millie was needed and their relationship improved for a time after this episode.

Millie frequently assists people with canes or wheelchairs to and from the dining room. On occasions when I have been there, the person helped has not said merely "thank you", but "Millie, you're the most unselfish person I've ever met," and "Millie you're so thoughtful, and with all your troubles too."

Before moving to the Home, she was hospitalized for several months. She spoke of that time in the following way: "While I was in the hospital I also was considered a helper. I helped whoever I could. The doctor considered me one of the most outstanding patients, in improving and in helping."

Her behavior is infused with expectations of mutual respect and loving responses from others. She gives help openly and joyously when she thinks it is needed. She expects to be thought of as "good" for this behavior, and subsequently, to be loved and respected for it by all. Her spirits are high when the feedback she receives in her interactions confirms her lovable self-image. She gets depressed when she receives no such confirmation. Moreover, she defines social interaction in terms of competition: she must be the best at what she does--gathering affection. Competing for love and attention is the way in which she demonstrates who she is.

We can begin to understand the emphasis she places on affective ties, and one of the possible reasons for this priority in her experience, when we look at the way in which she organizes her life history. For this shows us where much of the meaning in her life has been.

Millie did not receive the love and attention she needed during her childhood, and relationships with family members

were not stable or gratifying to her. The way she describes her early years now imparts a Cinderella quality to her childhood: she was the poor, unfortunate creature, pushed around and neglected by other family members.

She was born in Brooklyn, of immigrant parents, one of ten or twelve children. She is not sure of the exact number as some of her siblings died in infancy. She was one of the youngest and was the second daughter. She has always compared herself with her older sister, the lucky, favored one in the family. "S. was a prima donna. So beautiful and talented. She was an artist and a singer. I was the domesticated one. I helped my mother with all the housework...My sister was studying for the operatic stage." From her earliest childhood, Millie has envied this sister for the attention she received from her mother and her chance to pursue a career which led, according to Millie, to prestige and wealth. Millie dwells on the fact that her own childhood opportunities were severely limited because her mother did not pay as much attention to her.

Millie's father was in and out of real estate ventures, and he was not an entirely successful breadwinner. In addition, he was not around much and Millie did not receive the affection she needed from him either. Her childhood memories of her father are sparse: "I remember how unhappy mother was because he was a card player, and out late at night. He didn't help raise the family. It was all for my mother to do, and there was a lot of worry."

Her older brothers contributed to the financially precarious household and seem to have kept the family economically

afloat during her childhood. But she did not receive much personal attention from them either, as they were much older than she and some were out working and others had moved away by the time she was a small child.

When she was 16, she had to quit school and go to work to support herself and contribute to the household. She had taken commercial courses--typing, stenography, bookkeeping--in school, and she got a job as a bookkeeper in a jewelry store. There, she met her first husband and married at the age of 17.

In the course of our discussions, I asked her, "If you were writing the story of your life, how would you divide it into chapters?" She answered, "Well, I had three husbands." And later, "I had three completely different lifestyles." Her discussions of her life center around the relationships she had with these three men, the pivotal people in her life. Her marriages structured her life, imbued it with substance, but did not make her happy. Except for her first marriage, which ended with her husband's death after fifteen years, she had extremely frustrating relationships which she said never gave her any satisfaction or fulfilled her needs. She has experienced a long life without the intimacy she so craves. Indeed, her second and third husbands are the only people in her life who are never described in terms of the quality of their relationships with her!

Millie's three marriages are the major turning points in her life, transitions to which she had to adapt and restructure her lifestyle. The construction of priorities in her life

and the organization of her experience emerged and evolved in response to her relationships with these three men. Thus, her self-concept developed in the context of three, totally different marriages. But though her relationships with all three men were different, and demanded from her different roles, she made the necessary adjustments to them while maintaining and affirming important aspects of her self-image through certain activities. The changes in her life brought about by three marriages, the development of coping strategies, and the maintenance of components of her self-image are discussed below.

Millie looks back on her first marriage as a storybook romance. She adored her husband; he adored her. "I became a very wealthy woman, and very happy. I had three children. I had a beautiful life." She blossomed as a mother, homemaker, and business-partner to her husband. This was clearly the highpoint in her life. She never again describes herself as happy without reservation. This is the only man in her life she considers her "real" husband, the person with whom she had a perfect relationship. When I asked her what periods in her life stand out vividly she replied, "When I lost my husband, naturally."

She worked with him in the jewelry business and when he died, she continued to work. From that point on, employment, regardless of the specific job, became crucial to her emotional well-being and positive self-image. (And it continues to have this function now.) When describing the period immediately following the death of her first husband she said, "I got a

job in the jewelry business, and after awhile, I understood diamonds better than some men, even today. I even repaired watches...I had to work...but I worked also to relieve my mind and try and forget my husband..."

Work quickly became for her the most meaningful way to enhance her self-esteem. Only through work did she feel capable and worthwhile in the social world. In fact, she states that her biggest success in life was her continual employment. "I was in demand," she told me. "I was always pulled from one position to another," and "I was always capable of getting good jobs...In no time I picked up the business." She adapted easily to the numerous and varied jobs she held throughout her life and is very proud of this fact. One reason she views her ability to adapt in this sphere as a major success is because it counters the difficulty she had contending with both the lifestyles her second and third husbands imposed upon her and the transition periods between marriages.

Her jobs were also therapeutic. First, they were a way to ease the pain of the death of her first husband, and later, they gave her emotional strength and specific purpose during her subsequent marriages.

In telling her life story, she does not describe the specific nature of the jobs she held from the time her first marriage ended until she stopped working at age 67. Rather, as with her social interactions, Millie describes her employment history in terms of competition: "I answered this ad in the paper. I went to see this man who had a jewelry

store. And he said to me, 'You know what? I've interviewed forty or fifty people, and I want you for the job.'" And later, "I went into this beautiful store of ladies' clothes, there was a sign in the window, Lady Wanted. All I knew about clothes was what I wore. The man accepted me; there were eight other girls on that floor. Before you knew it, in no time, I was making more sales than all of them..."

It is only through the creation of this arena for social action that she is able to view herself as a success in the world and as a worthwhile person in her own right, and perhaps more importantly, to emphasize some positive aspects of her experience to balance the traumas and lack of fulfillment in her second and third marriages.

Millie describes her second husband as "brilliant," "talented," and "useful" but nowhere does she employ a word denoting affect to describe their relationship except "stormy." She never denigrates his character. He was a furniture designer, twenty years her senior, and according to Millie, he wanted her to be a "constant companion" on business trips and to accompany him to theater and concerts. He was very well-to-do; Millie married him to relieve her financial struggles. She described to me in detail the beautiful home and furniture he bought her.

When they were first married, he told her then teenage children he could not live with them--they cramped his style. So they moved away, an act which devastated Millie. After several years, she became pregnant. "You see, I wasn't supposed to get pregnant at all...He was very annoyed and

wanted me to do away with the baby." She entered this marriage on his terms, and by having a baby, she broke the contract. After the child was born, her husband abused her and the marriage deteriorated. To make matters worse, Millie could not develop a satisfying relationship with his child: "I couldn't get her to love me. I couldn't. And I tried every which way."

This period was extremely trying for a woman who needed much affection and was getting none. She said of this time: "The baby was in his way. The baby is what kept me going... That baby was my life, kept me as happy as I was able to be." This marriage ended in divorce after about five years, an experience which filled Millie with shame and embarrassment.

Five years later, she remarried. She describes her third husband as a "poor little fella." "I had no attachment whatsoever to him." She says that she married him for financial security and companionship. He was ten years younger than she and "looked the picture of health. I didn't know he was a sick man." For the twenty-five years they were married, he was in and out of hospitals with various illnesses, and Millie nursed him at home quite a bit. They moved around the country several times, seeking a better climate for him. She talks about these years in terms of the geographic moves they made, the apartments they fixed up and the disagreements they had with other tenants and landlords. Her husband figures in these discussions as another object to be considered in the move to a new place--something else to look after.

She spent more years supporting their marriage than did he. During this phase of her life, work kept her from dwelling

on her situation and from getting depressed, as well as providing their income. "I couldn't take staying at home," "Sitting drove me crazy," "I needed to do something"--are ways in which she describes her situation when she was between jobs. During this marriage she managed apartment buildings and held numerous clerical and retail jobs. This husband died ten years before I met her.

Millie's second husband's volatile personality and impossible demands created an emotionally pressured situation from which she barely survived intact mentally. The third husband turned out to be neither financially secure nor a companion. She speaks of these marriages--much of her life--as "hardships" that she "managed to endure," and as "a very trying existence."

Relationships are the main category of meaning in Millie's experience. The marriages are the structural framework upon which she builds her life story and through which she expresses her experiential world. She defines herself as worthwhile and successful through work. Another theme that emerges from her life story is an emphasis on the social status of others. People in her world are described in terms of concrete material qualities rather than abstract character traits, and only in terms of positive American values. Newcomers to the home are categorized as "brilliant" or "rich." Acquaintances are seen as "rich," "beautiful," or "having a magnificent home." Family members are variously described as "creative," "talented," "prominent," "outstanding," "wealthy," and "not rich, but brilliant."

Millie was not an affluent woman; in fact, her childhood was impoverished and much of her adult life was spent having to conserve what little money she had. Neither did she excel at any endeavor which could give her recognition in the community. She has always valued material wealth and personal accomplishment, and though she cannot demonstrate achievement in these areas through many of her own activities, she has devised a way to acquire status nevertheless--by association. She creates a world in which she is surrounded by successful others. She does not measure herself against the status of others, nor absorb the success of those with whom she interacts, but she is able to reach some level of satisfaction knowing that people in her world have achieved what she values.

The sister who she envied as a child and feels close to now is presently described as a "prominent, successful artist. She married very well, had a thirteen-room house, was left well-off as a widow...and she's gorgeous." Her sister's affluence and achievements are Millie's vicarious link to a more glamorous life, a life she craved but could not make her own.

Only at one point in her life did Millie attain a sense of personal achievement and social status--when she studied music as a teenager. Looking back, she feels this was the most influential experience of her life:

> One of my girlfriends was quite well-to-do. She was taking piano lessons and my family couldn't afford it. My oldest brother was like a father then, and I went crying to him that I wanted to study the piano. So, he let me. I went to this woman's home and took lessons from her. I'll never forget it. It was about a mile away, and I walked there everyday to practice for over a year because I had no piano and I had to

> wait until my brother could afford to buy me one. I went everyday. And I felt so proud, carrying my valise, with my music rolled up, walking back and forth. And he finally bought me a piano. I think it was in the $200 bracket. And I was the happiest child in the world. I stayed three or four years, long enough to be able to teach...

This incident is highly charged for Millie. For one thing, studying music put her in the same league with her talented older sister. Her own talent and artistic worth were finally acknowledged. Piano lessons also gave her status in the community. Only middle-class children studied music; her lessons made her feel like one of them. Carrying her valise in public to and from her lessons made her into a member of the community with status. With her music under her arm she was a special person, talented, well-off and recognized as such.

This is the only episode in the account of her life in which she is proud of herself. She does not use that word, or any equivalent, again, for there were no subsequent incidents in her life which elicited pride. Pride in one's achievements, however defined, is a critical component of self-worth in American society. With no feeling of material or artistic achievement since her teenage years, it is no wonder that Millie creates a way to acquire status by association now.

When discussing her past, her style of presentation, the manner in which she portrays herself to others and sees herself interacting with the environment, is as a straw-in-the-wind. That is, she describes situations so that the responsibility for her acts and her decisions falls on others. This style is a theme that appears when Millie explains how things happen

to her and around her. It comes into play when she talks about how changes occur in her world. By looking at Millie's style we can see how she interprets her own behavior and how she views herself in relationships with other people. This straw-in-the-wind theme has two major aspects: first, other people--mainly family members--make decisions for Millie at critical life junctures. Second, things happen to her that seem to be out of her hands. She explains the turn of events with a sense of fate, of external forces playing upon her, rather than of personal choice-making. I turn now to some examples of this theme from her account of her life.

When her second marriage became difficult and her husband asked her children to leave, they told her to stay with him and she complied, though that decision certainly did not resolve any problems for her. When the marriage became intolerable, she divorced because her doctor "ordered" her to do so. Then, the doctor "ordered me out of New Jersey with my baby. He said this climate is not good for your child. Go to a warm climate." And she did. These changes, all major upheavals in her life, are interpreted by Millie to mean she had no part in making them come to pass. Perhaps she could not--and cannot still--take full personal responsibility for these actions which were highly stressful at the time and did not by any means improve her situation.

She stated to me again and again that she had no intention of marrying a third time, not after such a traumatic second marriage. With a baby and job, she felt she had her hands full, and did not "want to look at a man." But then "circumstances

led to it." The third husband followed her when she moved to another city, met her relatives, and convinced them to talk her into marrying him. She said, "My brother and sister-in-law liked him very much. They got him in a room and they talked it over, talked it over. Then they said to me, 'He is going to be a father to your child. He loves you. You'll have security.' And they talked to me and talked to me and talked to me. And I married him." She was convinced or coerced into this marriage. And she presents this act as being out of her hands and beyond her control.

When she discovered that her husband was seriously ill, her brother told her to take him to a doctor, and the doctor told her to move with him to a drier climate. "I listened to him...I didn't like it, but I felt it was the best for him so I made the best of it." Apparently, the climate didn't help her husband, and the next thing to happen was that one of her children suggested she move to the West Coast. "We listened to her and sold everything."

She arrived and found an apartment but, "My daughter wouldn't let me live there." Shortly after she settled in an apartment that was approved by family members, her husband died. The ensuing events were described as follows: "My son insisted I go to my brother and sister-in-law. They took care of me for a while. When I came back, the kids made me get out of the house." Her children "decided" she should move again, first to a retirement residence, then to the institution where she now resides. They also "pulled" her to the hospital when she was ill. These moves were not always to her liking,

and occasionally she offered some resistance. But she always went along with their decisions and did not exert control over her own fate.

Of her employment history she stated at different points, "I was called from one job to another...I was taken from one concern to another...I was kidnapped from one place to another." She describes each new job situation as happening by fluke, or by luck. For instance, she met someone "accidently" who hired her, and later, "I don't know how it happened, but I got that job," or "He hired me on account of my handwriting." I find it rather ironic that Millie developed a sense of personal and social worth and now derives a large part of her self-esteem from past employment, yet she describes her job opportunities largely in terms of chance rather than skill.

Moving to this nursing facility was the most recent major transition in Millie's life. As with all her other upheavals, she has had to develop a way to cope with this one. She described her arrival here: "I just wandered around. I had to really make my own way. And I don't know how I managed it, but I did...I made up my mind to slowly and gradually manage it." From this point, she ceases to use passive verbs, and she does not portray herself as a straw-in-the-wind. Instead, she starts to speak of taking her life in her own hands and making decisions about how she will live.

Another stylistic theme emerges from her story when she discusses this current life phase: manipulating interaction. This newest theme represents Millie's decision to present herself to the world in full control of her situation. Only

in this way can she prevent herself from becoming overwhelmed and depressed by the institution and make the structure of her days meaningful.

In keeping with the importance she places on emotional commitment, Millie took control of her relationships--she structures them with purpose. As noted earlier, her best friend does what Millie wants and is who Millie needs her to be. And Millie manipulates general conversation so that she is sure of receiving verbal affection. When aides or other residents are not behaving toward her as she expects, she says, "I don't have to take that. You're here to respect me," or, "I don't have to take this language from you or anyone else. I love everyone and everyone here loves me." In this way, she perceptually 'corrects' the substance of the interaction to redefine the nature of the relationship and thus heal her wounded self-esteem.

She took control of the daily round in the facility, a difficult thing to do as many observers of large institutions have noticed (c.f., Caudill 1958; Henry 1963; Taylor 1970). One incident in particular illustrates how she is able to reorganize the scheduling of routine procedures to suit her needs. One morning I arrived at the Home at 10:30 to discover that Millie was not in the lounge area, the place I usually found her at that time. She had changed rooms the day before and was now located on another floor. I found her in the new room in the process of being dressed by an aide. She said to me: "I've been crying. The system is all changed. Upstairs they got me dressed so early. Here they come much later. I

can't stand staying down here so long. It's like a morgue." She clearly needs to be out of her room and in the public, shared space of the lounge and dining areas to feel alive. Within two days of this incident, she managed to get written orders from her doctor stating that she was to be dressed and upstairs by 9:30, so she could participate in the exercise class that took place then. (She had not appeared at exercise sessions before this.) From that time on, she was dressed by an aide before 9:30.

She also is in control of the image she presents at various classes and meetings that occur in the Home. The "welcome committee" meets once a week, and Millie walks around for at least an hour before the meeting begins saying to various people: "I want you to come to the meeting today. We have some important matters to discuss." Of the "history class" she states, "The teacher considers me one of the top-notch students." And of the "writing workshop," "The teacher bawled me out for missing a class last week. He says I'm the best in the class, and the class is much more fun when I'm there." She has asserted herself as a leader and an organizer in the Home. She manipulates interactions so that she will be showered with praise by others. She again views herself in a competitive arena. By these methods, she is able to create personal achievements and acquire some of the valued status that has eluded her for so long.

Her most recently developed manipulative device is knitting. This activity draws several themes together. First, it serves as her current form of employment (though

she is not paid) as it functions in the same way her various jobs did--it fills her time and gives her a specific purpose. Second, everyone constantly praises her work, and she has many requests for custom-made objects. She basks in these compliments which have given her eyes new sparkle and her whole being new energy. At last she has found a way to be successful and to be recognized in her community: "I've got enough orders to last me the rest of my life. They're keeping me busy. Everyone wants hats." Third, knitting is also a means to receive more affection; for when she makes someone something, the person invariably throws his or her arms around Millie and says, "I love you." Through knitting, she has found a way to fulfill some important life-long needs.

The theme of manipulating interaction illustrates how Millie is adapting to the institutional setting. More specifically, it shows us what Millie changes and what she keeps the same to preserve and highlight the important aspects of her identity--who she feels she is in the world. The nature of personal relationships continues to be her major experiential category of meaning, and she organizes her behavior now in light of this category. Moreover, she understands herself through this category, and the structure and interpretation of her relationships flow from this self-conception. Manipulating interaction is a more optimistic, life affirming and controlled response to how she views her relationship with the environment and how she explains events than is the straw-in-the-wind theme. Employment and social status remain

relevant as themes as they are vehicles through which Millie is able to create a positive self-image and generate as much happiness for herself now as possible.

Ben

Ben has been fighting a battle within himself for most of his 74 years--a battle between his "sober," "steady," "responsible" side and his "carefree," "happy," "romantic" side. One of his major life themes is this dichotomy of self. He categorizes much of his experience by the struggle between these two aspects of himself and by the way this struggle has influenced his activities and decisions. Ben describes himself in terms of these two character types:

> I look in the mirror and I see my father, a very serious guy. My normal, deadpan expression is what my father had which was a no-nonsense guy who had a big burden on his shoulders. And that's the kind of face I show to the world. But I don't feel that way. I feel carefree and happy... and I could easily slide or slip into a romantic adventure.

Turning to the component parts of this theme, we see that Ben's reference point for the sober aspect of his identity is his father. He says he resembles his father physically, and this similarity seems to underline for Ben another, more profound likeness--the serious and responsible approach to life. His father was a factory worker who labored long hours most of his life. He had no "workmen's compensation," and apparently lived in constant fear of potential accidents at the factory or debilitating illness. Ben's memories of his father are of a nervous man greatly burdened by financial worries. There were many children in the family and Ben's

father felt the responsibility of giving them all a college education. Through his determination, he did manage to educate his whole family.

Ben says that, until he was a grown man, he did not realize the precarious financial situation his family maintained. He never felt he lacked anything as a child, but his memories of his mother are similar to those of his father: she stands out as a constantly worried woman, troubled over how to provide for the family and educate the children.

Like his father, Ben has carried the weight of financial worry throughout his life and, also like his father, he has dealt with this situation through responsible behavior and a grave attitude. (Ben's economic worries per se will be discussed later as they constitute another theme in his life.) Financial hardship was certainly a basis for the serious self-concept. But Ben's feelings of being heavily burdened applied to more than economic concerns. He describes himself during his childhood and youth as "a fearful, nervous person... I worried myself sick...I'll never amount to anything." As a student he was "docile, and well-behaved;" Ben was not one to rock the boat. He took his education quite seriously and imbued it with a profound fear of failure and being "found out to be stupid." Discussions of his childhood and youth focus mainly on his education. Looking back now he says that doing well in school gave him his greatest pleasure as a child; failing in a class was his greatest worry. He was strongly motivated to please his parents and their greatest happiness came from his good report cards. He lived in fear of disappointing them.

At the age of 14, he was sent to a Catholic Order boarding school and from that time until he graduated from high school, he was burdened with the decision of whether or not to become a priest. His parents "tried to make a priest" out of him, but he did not want to devote his life to service and at age 20, he left the Order.

In his adulthood, Ben's somber and responsible side is clearly seen in the choices he made regarding his marriage and the job he held for thirty years. His wife died several months before I interviewed him. He was married thirty-five years and for half that time his wife had a seriously debilitating illness and was bedridden. He describes his marriage before his wife's illness as "mediocre." Their relationship was never fulfilling to Ben and he said, "M. should have married her mother. That was who she was closest to, not me...We were too dumb to go to a marriage counselor." He accepted the relationship, though unsatisfactory, and stated: "You don't walk out on something just because it's difficult."

When his wife became ill, he felt responsible not only for maintaining the marriage, but also for providing her with all the comforts he could. He hired people to care for her but he spent much time with her himself, even though he was extremely frustrated by such a limiting existence. He states that he would have been terribly guilt-ridden had he left her when her health began to deteriorate. He chose the loyal, moral response to this situation, and placed devotion to his wife above the gratification of personal desires.

He describes his wife's life since her illness began as "a first-class tragedy." It is interesting to note that he does not see his own life this way. He mentions that other people looking at his life, would think of it as "pretty rugged," "sad," or a "rough sacrifice." Possibly, it is the lack of emotional involvement with his wife that has kept her tragedy from becoming his own. Ben perceived the burden of her illness and the care she required as a moral responsibility but not as cause for his own suffering.

Of his job as a bureaucrat he stated: "I was bored out of my skull," and "I stayed there twenty years too long." One of the reasons he gives for "enduring this boring life" was his duty to support his wife's care. He viewed this job as the easiest possible way to earn a living and care for her. He was afraid to quit, afraid to look for something more stimulating and challenging as he might not be able to meet the financial demands of his wife's health needs.

While telling his life story, Ben stresses his circumspect behavior and his presentation of self (Goffman 1959) to the world as one who had a heavy burden to carry, but one who accepts it with equanimity. His actions were consistently motivated by his perceived responsibilities, not by her personal wishes. Thus, Ben's "carefree" side has always been submerged; it is rather remarkable that he can <u>feel</u> that way now, after a life spent in "doing the right thing."

But he has needed to express his "carefree" side, and his failure to find a way to do so has been his biggest frustration. He feels he paid a great price for the kind of

life he chose to live and said, "I should have...I would have longed to have been a stockbroker, or a real estate speculator or a traveler...But I wasn't adventurous enough to quit my job." And later he told me: "I would have given a lot to have been a successful fiction writer. But to write an exciting story you have to experience some things. But my experience--there are no highpoints, no dramas in it. It's all slow, enduring patience."

This last statement of who he is and how his life has been is a far cry from the adventurous spirit he feels himself also to be. That self has always wanted a life of risk, romance and excitement. But Ben was not able to create that life for himself and cannot still, though he has no current moral or financial obligation. Reasons for his inability to manifest that side of himself will emerge as we explore other themes in his life.

A motivating force in Ben's life has been the <u>need for financial security</u>. We have seen how it contributed to his sober self-image. In addition, this need serves as an explanatory principle--it accounts for why things happened the way they did and it is the basis on which many of his decisions were, and still are, made. The need for financial security is connected to the concepts of success and competition. Taken together, they form a category of meaning through which Ben interprets his past and justifies his present behavior.

This theme became apparent when I asked him what he considered to be the successes and frustrations in his life. Two events are defined as successes: getting out of teaching

and getting to know a particular stockbroker. Ben talks about his teaching experiences in the context of expanding his horizons, of breaking away from his insulated childhood and youth.

He was born and raised in a small town in the Midwest and he attended college there as well. He moved to a larger Midwestern city at the age of 24 when he got his first teaching job. He said of that time, "I realized then how timid I was about the future. How shy I was with women. It was only then that I began to date...Arriving in (Central City) was a big thrill for me, big city life compared to (Small Town). It was a romance."

Ben taught high school for ten years prior to World War II, at which time he was drafted into the Army. This experience is seen by Ben to have broadened him further, to have given him a new perspective on his profession. In the Army it occurred to him that men who were not as smart as he were earning much more money. He felt he could easily compete with them. "Some of those guys were so dumb they couldn't remember general orders. And they couldn't speak good English. All they knew was how to sell cars or washing machines. I began to realize that at sales, I could make twice as much money as a schoolteacher."

He never became a salesman, but when the war ended, he moved to the East Coast and was offered a job in a corporation. He held this job for thirty years. Not only did he make more money, and thus consider himself successful, but he also took a risk--going from what he knew and what was comfortable to the

unknown business world. He is quite risk-averse and the ability to "venture into one" at all is seen by Ben as an accomplishment.

Meeting the stockbroker is viewed as a success as it enabled Ben to make more money through investments. "After I met him, I immediately started making money. And I actually made as much money in the market as I made on the job."

These "successes" are not derived from a sense of inner achievement or self-actualization. Neither are they derived from social status or power gathered in the larger community. Their meaning for Ben is in pure, economic gain. This need has been so strong throughout his life that, though he is financially secure now, when he looks at his past, success is still to be measured in these terms. As mentioned above, he is well-aware that his job did not satisfy him in the least. And though he says that the money he made in the stockmarket gave him "freedom to all my dreams" (i.e., travel, excitement and adventure), he did not, and still has not, used his economic freedom to realize his dreams. Actually, his job was a disappointment and his investment income has not been spent in a gratifying way. The fact that he can define these experiences as "successful" now, even with hindsight and security, illustrates the power some themes have over time to structure meaning.

Ben's great frustration in life was that he never became "a selling writer of fiction." He took writing courses and worked very hard at it, but as mentioned earlier, he feels he failed at this because he did not have the personal "experiences" which make a piece of fiction "thrilling." Moreover, he was

inhibited by his strong feeling of competing with other writers. He said, "If I didn't read what others were writing, I might be dumb enough to think I could sell something...But as I would read something, I'd think, this guy is wonderful. What the hell as I dreaming about competing with him now?...I mean, I was third, fourth, fifth echelon down and the only people who were selling were the top echelons." Writing for Ben clearly entails competing with people at the "top." His lack of "exciting experiences" coupled with the barrier of stiff competition stifled the pursuit of this career.

He measures success in writing in terms of the amount of money made by selling the product: "That guy probably made $5,000 out of that book. But I never made a dime out of writing." He wrote stories with the idea of selling them. When he realized his stories would not sell, he gave up. And so he adopts a fatalistic attitude; if he cannot make money writing, he can only be disappointed, for writing serves the need of economic gain. In and of itself it is not a motivating force for Ben.

Religion is a third theme in Ben's life. It organizes his conversations and it is the framework around which he builds his life story. I asked him to tell me about his childhood: "We were brought up in an Irish Catholic family a few blocks away from the parochial school that I attended. My mother was very pious. Both my parents were very proud of my oldest brother who became a priest...They tried very hard to make a priest out of me...but I was the one who was sort of the black sheep...a good boy, but he didn't take to the

priesthood idea, and what else compares with that?" His orientation in space, his character, the values he was taught, the description of family members and family life--all are interpreted through the theme of religion.

The entire account of his early years is structured similarly, with religion at the hub. He sees his life in terms of closeness to and distance from the religious ideals of his family. He tells of being sent away to boarding school to be made a priest and said, "I lost my vocation before very long." He did not want to devote his life to the Order and he was not satisfied with the minimum amount of education he was to be given there. "I was an intellectual...And that's what drove me out of the Order. Had they given me ten years of schooling at the time when I wanted it, I would have been a member yet." His description of himself through these years is based upon two things: his perception of his relationship to the Order and his interpretation of other peoples' (primarily family members) views of this relationship. Of his leaving the Order he said, "I felt very badly at the time, and I worried a lot about the effect on my parents." It is evident that the religiously-based self-concept of youth has contributed greatly to the serious and morally correct side of his identity.

His plans for the future center on religion as well, for he views it as the most meaningful activity in which to engage. "My whole quest is to learn more about what does the Supreme Being ask of me for the balance of my life?...I will probably start to read more, more conscientiously about religion because it's the only lasting thing, the only stable thing."

Religion structures his self-concept, both past and present. In addition, it provides him with emotional support, more than any person gives him. As a supportive device, religion gives Ben an optimistic outlook on life and it enables him to deal positively with the difficult experiences he has had to face. For example, he feels his religious beliefs have enabled him to weather successfully the "tragedy" of his wife's illness and the "perpetual crisis" his life has been in the last few years. He is glad he is religious and says "I haven't seen anything else to compare with it. And the friends I have are far less happy than I am with their world outlook and their look to the future...I consider life a big gift. And the next life an even greater one. So, I don't regret...I'm very grateful."

His faith has kept him from being bitter about his sad and limiting domestic situation. There can be no doubt that a strong, positive force affects him deeply as his eyes shine with life and he always smiles. He does not give the appearance of a man heavily burdened. On the contrary, he looks like the "carefree," "happy" person he feels he is inside. His faith surely contributes to this visage.

As Ben talks about his life, no turning points emerge, no periods during which he refocused his priorities or gained a new perspective on himself. To be sure, he faced transitions at different life stages--entering the army, marriage, a career change, widowhood--in which he took on new roles and entered into new relationships (Mandelbaum 1973:181), but these various behavioral shifts do not constitute for him

categories of meaning. They have not altered his image of who he is in the world, or his values, and they are not the framework upon which he builds his life story. In fact, these transitions are not discussed as being changes or as representing adjustments. Rather, (except for marriage which he omits) Ben defines his life transitions as he defines the successes discussed earlier: "getting into the army, getting out of teaching, and learning that I could make money in the stockmarket." Transitions that mean something to Ben are those that can be measured in terms of the economic gain to which they lead.

A corollary of the absence of turning points is Ben's behavioral style. We have already seen that he views his life as "no highpoints,...all slow, enduring patience." No people, events, or experiences stand out as he tells his story. No episodes in his life are imbued with affect. The key quality here is monotony.

Life is monotonous because Ben never was actively engaged in life. He still is not. This is a continuous stylistic theme that runs through his life, and aspects of it are evident when we see how he views his relationships and how he does things.

One component of Ben's style is <u>emotional vacuum</u>. By this I mean that Ben has no meaningful social relationships (he loves no one, he hates no one), and thus has no reason to register or express emotion. When I asked, "How would you divide your life into chapters?" he said "I would proceed chronologically--childhood, teenage, employment, retirement.

And then have to add chapters of the emotional states." The point here is that, for Ben, emotional states are perceived as something added to life; they do not seem to be an integral part of it.

At no time does he mention the existence of a close personal friend. I asked him who were the important people in his life as he was growing up and he mentioned a few teachers who stood out as role models for a time. Throughout his adulthood, he had no strong social ties. When I asked him who he feels closest to now he replied, "My brother and my sister, that's about it." Neither of them resides in the same city as Ben, but they have functioned as his support network in recent years, for instance, in helping him reorganize his life after his wife died and in assisting him with other family matters as they arise. He summarized his lifelong attitude toward relationships: "I tried to avoid complications. I take the easy way out--in personal relationships and other things. Rather than blasting away arguing with somebody about the way it should be, I would rather skip it."

He does not have children. He said, "I had no particular ambition to have children and now I'm glad, because I don't think I would have been a good parent. Much too nervous and worried--like my own parents. I guess that had something to do with it. It would have been a difficult adjustment for me." Ben has chosen an emotional vacuum over the joys, frustrations, richness and complexity that close relationships provide.

A second aspect of Ben's style is social isolation. He referred to his child self as the "black sheep," the family deviant. Through his youth and early adulthood, he was "timid and fearful" and shied away from involvement with others. He says that even before his wife was ill, they did not have much of a social life; what little they had nearly vanished when she became bedridden.

During the last few years of his marriage, part of his isolation was imposed upon him by his wife. He says she resented his acquaintances, a few of whom she met. She got very annoyed when he received a phone call: "Half the time, I wasn't even getting my messages. People were saying, 'I don't know who it was that answered, but she was awfully snappy.' The YMCA called up and said my membership is due and she said 'He doesn't live here anymore.'" His wife alienated the few friends he did have and treated him as a non-person.

Now, he has "no feeling of closeness" with any of his acquaintances. He stated, "There's no intimacy either expected or wanted or anticipated there." And he views his future similarly: "I'll be narrowed down to the time when I will be alone..."

The third component of this theme is passivity. Ben considers himself lazy. I asked him to describe his current daily routine and he replied, "It's a lazyman's day...I don't have a very ambitious life." We have seen that he views his past as uneventful and boring. He could not create excitement or bring newness into his life. He noted that if "somebody had come along" with an idea, he would "have jumped at the

chance," but he could not generate change by himself. He predicts passivity for his future as well. "Unless somebody comes along and fires me with a new enthusiasm, I guess it's going to continue pretty much the way it is now, a lazy life..."

His detachment-from-life style contributes to both sides of his dichotomous self. Lack of emotional investment in people and activities can only make life "steady," "sober," and "uneventful." And no meaning in relationships also makes life "carefree." Ben's style, the way he presents himself to others and defines social relationships, reinforces and continually recreates that divided self-concept.

This style also has contributed to--and is a product of--the pattern of his lifecourse and the way he views himself in different contexts. He has never made a niche for himself, never 'fit' into the situations of which he was a part. He feels he was an outcast to his family since he did not want religious training. Teaching did not satisfy him as he could not make enough money. He could not be a writer for lack of "experiences." He was bored and frustrated in his meaningless job as a bureaucrat. His marriage did not fulfill him in any way.

He does not even 'live' in his house. When he retired, he moved with his wife back to the West Coast to the home of his mother-in-law who had told him, "Why don't you bring M. here? I can care for her better than you can." I visited him after his mother-in-law died. The house was extremely drab and depressing--grey walls, grey furniture. Ben told me that all the furnishings belonged to his mother-in-law; his furniture was in storage. When at home, he spent most of his time in

one room upstairs, a room overcrowded and equipped with a bed, desk, typewriter, television, radio, and books--all the things he needed. When I visited him after his wife died, he still had not 'moved into' the rest of the quite sizable house. He clearly prefers to reside in the only space he felt comfortable in during the five preceding years. Now, he is lonely and spends much of his time "puttering around" rather aimlessly looking for things that might capture his imagination. This is a man whose behavioral style plays a great part in the formation of identity.

I have tried to highlight some connections among the themes in Ben's life. To be sure, themes in a life interact in a multitude of ways. To provide one example, I will briefly consider an issue that is a major preoccupation for Ben, generosity, as it illustrates one relationship among themes in his life.

First of all, for Ben, the concept is grounded in religion; generosity is a primary value which stems from his religious upbringing. His ideals are the Christian saints, people whose lives were guided by unequivocal service. He discusses at great length their charity and compassion in the face of utter poverty. He describes these people as "heroic;" they are most definitely the heroes in Ben's life. No people he has known personally have influenced Ben as much.

Secondly, Ben has conflicting notions about the part played by generosity in his own self-image. When I asked him what his best character trait was, he stated, "Generosity. Anybody who wants anything that I can give them, including

just little things like transportation and time, I do it without question." But as we talked further, it became evident that Ben holds another view as well for he stated, "I don't have this self-giving that other people do. Some of my friends will go visit people in hospitals. I admire that tremendously. That's what I should do...But I'm not generous." He would like generosity to be his best quality, but he falls short of his ideal.

Thirdly, the act of generosity is strongly influenced by his need for financial security. He said he has "always been too frightened of the economic future to be generous. Lots of causes have come up for which I gave a dollar, when I could have given a hundred." His need to hold onto his resources has conflicted with his religious ideals. At the present time he is financially secure, and his view of how he can be generous reflects this: "I don't do things personally for people, but the money that I have--I am already dispensing to friends and relatives." This statement contradicts the giving self he describes above. Nevertheless, his priorities of giving money rather than time and energy are clearly ordered now, for he says of an acquaintance who talks incessantly, "I haven't got the generosity to listen to him by the hour. I would rather give him a thousand dollars than listen to him for a thousand hours."

Fourthly, this choice of how he prefers to be generous illustrates his detached style. He would rather not get personally involved in the lives of others. Giving money brings him closer to his religious models while enabling him to be uncommitted emotionally to the cause.

Stella

Whenever I visit Stella in her studio, I am struck by a whirlwind of activity. She is always doing several things at once. This is a busy woman with a full life. I have watched her teach a painting class while at the same time hang a large tapestry on the wall by herself, repair the plumbing under the sink, stack fifty-pound bags of clay, and pay bills. This much activity at once is typical. Her energy and determination are remarkable. She happens to be 82 years old. She has a small, delicate frame. It does not seem possible that so much energy can emanate from such a slight body. One notices her sharp blue eyes immediately. When she speaks to someone, they penetrate intensely, but with a gleam of humor.

Stella is an artist. The following discussion of her identity will focus on how and in what ways the creative process is at the core of her self-concept and her view of the world. A number of issues, equally weighted, emerge from Stella's story as she explains her life. There is no particular theme as the dominant category of meaning in her experience.

She was born on a farm in the deep South, the second of three children. She is able to trace her family on both sides back to before the Civil War in the United States. At the time she was born, her family was living on rich land belonging to her mother's kin. Her father wanted to establish his own farm, so they moved to the Southwest and homesteaded. Her fondest, happiest memories are of her early childhood on a large, successful farm. She looks back on that time, though

filled with hard work, as the most perfect, blissful existence. The independence and self-sufficiency her father sought and achieved during her childhood is a critical factor in her heritage; it became a pivotal driving force in her own life.

Her family was extremely close-knit; on an isolated farm, they had one another to share the chores and provide entertainment, comfort and support. As a child, Stella wanted to be different from her siblings. She says her sisters were "ladies;" she was a tomboy. They did everything well, wore dresses, played the piano. She would not fashion herself in their mold. Instead, she climbed trees, played with boys, and rode the horses. She describes her child self as "Li'l Abner."

When she finished high school, she moved several hundred miles away to live with a relative in a city so she could establish her own life. There, she attended college, but her education was cut short after about a year when World War I started. She immediately got a clerical job which she loved as it enabled her to live independently and create her own social life. She was adventurous; she took vacation trips with friends by automobile around the country after the war, travelling through places where no roads existed, camping along the way.

At the age of 24, she moved to the city in which she now lives to marry a man from the Southwest whom she had known for some years. The marriage was brief; her husband was unfaithful. Shortly after her child was born, they divorced. In the early 1930s, she was poor, divorced, and had a child to

raise on her own. She met the challenge. She got a secretarial job which she held for thirty-five years, was actively involved with her child in the Girl Scouts, and deciding to continue her education, took night courses in economics and philosophy. When Stella was 40, her daughter died of an illness. This tragic event changed the course of her life and turned her into an artist.

Now, one central theme in her life is the importance of doing, especially doing creative work, and the need for achievement which accompanies it. She is future-oriented and goal-oriented and is driven by the need to accomplish more and be better. When I told her I was interested in how people reflect back on their lives, she said to me, "I don't look back at all. I only look forward to what I'm going to do next."

She does consider her past however, by competing with it. She compares herself now with the quality of her work and the quantity of her output during other periods in her life. "The only time I look back is when I think, 'I used to do better sculptures and paintings!...Ten years ago I was making more than I am now. I exhibited a lot, and got prizes. I have to get back to work, so I won't have to say that."

Not only does she compete with herself, but she also competes with the other artists and art students who come to the studio she owns and operates. She said, "They were such poor sculptors and potters and painters when they came. And I was so much better. But I didn't do any of my own work because I was busy running the place. And that's when I began to feel

bad, because they were learning and catching up with me, and getting ahead of me. Pretty soon, they didn't know I knew anything about art." Stella needs to be the best at what she does. She needs to have her work highly regarded by others and she derives fulfillment and esteem largely from other people's conceptions of her as a good artist.

But she also needs to achieve her own inner goal of creativity. She says that her greatest pleasure is in "making something" she is pleased with, "accomplishing something." The creative process is inherently frustrating for her however as she is never quite satisfied with her work, never quite reaches her goal. When I asked her what she would like to do now more than anything else she replied, "Make one piece that I'm satisfied with. And I want it to be good, good art. That's all that's important to me now." Her lack of satisfaction with her work is a continual source of frustration.

Her need for achievement and recognition and her competitive spirit have been part of her self-image since her early years. When she talks about her childhood and youth, she emphasizes her accomplishments, successes and failures: "I learned so much at home before I started school that they skipped me from the first to the third grade...I took elocution lessons and gave many speeches. I did better than anyone else in the county...But one time my mind went blank; I couldn't remember a thing. I never gave another speech again. That one just killed me." In great detail she related how she was the third ranking student in her high school class, how difficult it was for her to go to college, how proud she was

of accumulating the appropriate number of credits, how she failed an examination. These are the events of her youth that stand out now.

She has always wanted to do more, to know more, to strive harder. Of the period in her life when she was raising her child and working full-time as a secretary she said, "I wanted to keep myself busy and I always wanted more education so I went to night school for four years. We wrote short stories and studied philosophy and political economy." She has always felt she could tackle more projects and explore more areas of knowledge.

Stella's need to accomplish is given shape by a second theme around which she organizes her experience and defines priorities--her sense of aesthetics and need for perfection. Her role models for perfection are the two most important people in her life, her mother and her daughter. Everything they did was "beautiful" and "perfect." I asked her to describe her mother. She replied: "She was a creative person, an interesting person, a very capable women, and so pretty! And a stickler for everything. Things had to be done just right. And she would never get tired, just going all the time." Stella describes her mother as a perfectionist where housework was concerned: "I couldn't just drain the dishes, they had to be dried. We had to scald them so they would dry easily. And the clothes had to be boiled in lye. My mother made her own soap in this kettle...And she was the greatest cook in the world..." Her mother was talented in other areas as well: "She was such a good seamstress, made a lot of money

at it...and wrote short-stories too..." Her mother's ability and productivity have been lifelong guiding forces as qualities worth emulating.

Stella's daughter, too, "was good in everything she tried...She was so talented in art. I couldn't imagine where she got it from..." Stella described at length her child's ability to work in many media and the prizes she won for her art. In addition, she was a perfectly-behaved child. "I never had to criticize her for anything." Her daughter died at the age of 13--a tragic event which had a profound effect on the development of Stella's identity. The child is frozen in Stella's memory on the brink of maturation and artistic promise. There is only perfection to remember.

These memories have become guiding principles for Stella, and since her daughter's death she has tried to act on them. The impact of this death on Stella's self-concept will be discussed in greater detail later. Here I want to stress that her sense of productivity, beauty and perfection first inspired by her mother, later heightened by the way she viewed her child, was finally given supreme value when the child died.

Stella strives for perfection in herself and would like to see others do the same. She said, "I think I expect too much of people. I get impatient when things aren't done just right." Her world may be divided into two sorts of people: those who strive for perfection as she does, and those who are careless and insensitive both to others and to physical objects. She has given me countless examples of the latter type. For instance, "Everyone I know is so clumsy. Why is

that? Everyone who comes over here knocks something down. Whenever I serve anyone coffee they knock it over. I never like to use a good tablecloth 'cause I know it's going to get dirty." People "break things" and "mess things up." They impinge on her sense of aesthetics.

All people seek order in their lives. But where they seek order depends upon cultural values and personal priorities. Stella strives for aesthetic order. This is unusual in American society where most people are concerned primarily with the order of time and objects. Americans put heavy emphasis on precise scheduling, with calendars and clocks to organize time into controllable units. People in our culture who are not aware of time are considered odd. Indeed, mental health status in the U.S. is judged in part by whether or not people know what day it is.[3] Stella frequently does not know the date or the time of day, and she easily forgets appointments. One reason for this is her intense involvement with the task at hand--whether it is teaching a student, writing a letter or cleaning a closet. Her days are spent in a succession of completely absorbing tasks. The cateogry of time does not enter into her activities; it is not relevant to her experience.

The order of physical objects is the other dominant area of concern in our culture: neatness is valued. One look at Stella's home shows that physical order is not important to her either. Her small apartment is very cluttered. She has trouble finding what she is looking for in the stacks of papers and objects that surround her. Her apartment is filled mostly by art work given to her by friends and other artists. She

said, "I know this place is awfully cluttered...But I have sentiments. More than most people I think. I don't like to give things up. I always have a special use for each little thing." The meaning of the art objects clearly outweighs the clutter they create. And Stella generally ignores the mess, focusing instead on the beautiful things she creates in the midst of the chaos, such as a vase full of flowers or an arrangement of pieces of sculpture she has collected.

A third theme in Stella's life is the categorization of people. With no immediate family now, virtually all the people she has known for the past twenty years have entered her life through the doors of her artist's studio. She thus meets most people on an artist-to-artist basis. But Stella needs to express other aspects of herself as well, and she has created roles for herself in order to fulfill this need.

Most of the people who work at her studio are young--in their 20s and 30s. All of the people who work there are at least a generation younger than Stella. These are the people with whom she interacts most of the time; they are simultaneously her friends, children, students and support network. The problem is that they fulfill all these roles partially, but none of them fully. Stella places a high priority on her relationships with these artists. She said that what she would like "more than anything else would be to have a party and invite all the people who have ever worked at the studio." People come into her life when they arrive to work at the studio for a few months or years, and then disappear from her life when they move away or stop working there. People flow

through her life. She grows fond of many of them and would like to keep them close to her. Her collection of art work is a symbolic way to achieve this closeness. She said "I like being surrounded by my artwork. It's like they are my friends. They've all been made by friends." The people may come and go, but their art remains for Stella as a means for keeping friendships alive.

Stella taught some of these people when they were small children. Her eyes light up when she talks about the artistic development "these kids" made under her tutelage and how they come back to visit her now that they are grown. I observed that her relationships with the young people she has known for years is infused with a warm, nurturing quality. She takes pleasure following their careers and successes as if they were her own children. In a sense they are, as she poured much of her mothering energy into teaching them after her own child died. Teaching children and watching them grow up enabled her to continue being a mother.

Stella says she has always tried to be a good teacher. She has taught art, in schools and in her own studio, for more than thirty years. She describes in great detail the qualities of teachers who most inspired her own work--those who were able to stimulate her creativity--and she strives to do that for others. Teaching has always satisfied her tremendously. She said, "It makes you feel like you're doing something worthwhile." She currently feels bereft of this role in light of the progress she feels everyone at the studio is making. Part of her drive to do is related to her expressed need for this role. She feels that if she makes more art and invents more techniques, she will be a better teacher.

Stella has actively created the roles of friend, mother and teacher out of the relationships with people who walk through her studio door. Her support network comes from this group as well. There are no people in her life with whom she feels especially close or on whom she feels she can rely in a crisis. She does not have a support network ready and waiting--relatives or friends she knows she can count on. Instead, her supports emerge at the time of a crisis. Whoever is with her or at the studio when help is needed is the person to whom she turns. For example, her spontaneous support system was called into play when she had an automobile accident several months before I met her. She said, "After my car was hit, I called the two boys who were working at the studio that night. One drove me to the hospital. The other one drove my car home." If she is ill and cannot run errands, people at the studio offer to do them for her. She is fortunate as she is surrounded by people who are considerate and who will respond to whatever emergencies arise.

For the most part however, Stella is extremely self-sufficient. She has maintained the strong independence of her youth. She hates to ask anyone to do anything for her, even in a serious situation. "Sure, these kids will do things for me. They're always asking if I need anything at the store, but I never like to ask anybody to do things. I don't want to inconvenience anyone." She does not want to depend on anyone for anything. The studio is a transient place. Stella alone is its core of stability. Perhaps she does not wish to

rely too heavily on others as she knows that they will not be there for her in the future--as friend, student, or support.

Nobody has as much personal commitment to the studio as Stella, and thus, she ends up doing most of the work around the place. She does this work selflessly. She gives all of her energy to her studio, her art, and the people who come into her life. Stella views her requests of others as "inconvenient;" she refuses to bother anyone. But people are forever bothering her. She has little, if any, time for her own work, and she complains about this. But her sense of responsibility toward running the studio and her priority on giving time and energy influence her behavior. "If somebody wants anything, well, this is my workplace. I feel like I have to. They always look to me to do it. Everybody looks to me to do it." Consequently, her own work is always interrupted.

She is so generous, so selfless, that it is hard for her to imagine doing anything for herself. I asked her what an ideal day would be like. She replied, "Well, I would not be interrupted, until I get the most important things done, at least. But that doesn't happen one day in a year, hardly. When I have a day that I can start doing some of my own work, I don't know what to do with myself. I'm just lost." Having the chance to do her own work disorients her; she cannot conceive of catering to herself. Self-indulgence does not fit her self-image.

Her selflessness applies to her entire life, not just the running of the art studio. When I asked her to tell me

some of the things she does when she is not working she stated, "I go to the ballet on Sunday afternoons. That's a nice time 'cause it doesn't bother anybody." The art studio is closed then. She would never think of scheduling something for herself if it might conflict with anyone's desire to work at the studio, or if someone might need something from her. All her thoughts and activities revolve around the perceived needs of other people.

There are times, of course, when she gets tired of this, when the frustration of not doing her own work mounts up. During those times she says, "I have either to be selfish, or not selfish." This is a black and white issue for her; there is no possibility of compromise in this area.

Stella is as trusting as she is selfless. Her complete trust in others has evolved to complement a theme in her life discussed earlier, the categorization of others. Trust is evident in the way she conceptualizes space: there are no clear boundaries between public and private arenas. For one thing, her apartment is located directly behind the studio. She had it built there. A door separates the two but it is usually open. And, the door has no lock. She works both in her studio and her apartment, and moves objects from one space to the other regularly. Artists and students come into her apartment freely if she is there to ask questions. Her apartment is an extension of her studio; it is not conceived as private space.

One reason she deals with space in this way is to make it easy for people to enter her life. Stella loves and needs

to be surrounded by people. With no immediate family or intimate friends, that is, no close ties through blood or affect, she arranges her life so that there can be closeness through physical space.

Secondly, her private property is a lending library. She unhesitatingly loans to others books and memorabilia that have much personal value. She trusts, and she assumes that everyone is trustworthy. When she meets people who betray this trust, she cannot understand how such behavior is possible.

She related several incidents in which her assumptions of mutual trust were shattered. For example, "One time, when I was sick for a long time, I had two boys working for me. They just bled me, cleaned me out. Took anything they wanted. Told me they were going to give some of my books to the library. But I bet you they built themselves a nice library. I didn't have enough sense to know what they were doing. I just trusted them." She never directly questioned the boys, nor did she replace the books. She let the matter drop. Even after this incident and others similar to it, she continues to share what she has with relative strangers.

Stella does not change her style of behavior even when faced with its negative consequences, in this case, loss of property. She makes no changes because trust is her chosen strategy for building relationships as well as for acquiring personal household assistance. On the occasions when she cannot fend for herself and must rely on others for housekeeping and other chores, she does so by opening her life completely. As she has no private domain, everything she owns and everything

she is become easily accessible. She says, "You have to be trusting. How can you not be?" As with her selflessness, her trust is absolute. Though she is aware of their drawbacks, Stella does not relinquish these complementary themes--selflessness and trust--because she perceives them to be critical both to the formation of close relationships and the maintenance of the studio.

The drive to accomplish, the sense of aesthetics, the creation of roles, the selfless and trusting style--these are the themes which motivate Stella and through which she explains her life. Yet, taken together, these themes do not fully elucidate Stella's identity, her understanding of how art and work and creativity merge to define both who she is and the essence of life. But there is an event in her history which stands out to forge her identity and give these themes an operating framework: the death of her daughter. As Stella talks, it is clear that this child's death is the major turning poing in her life. It is the event which divides her life history into two distinct sections. Her understanding and explanation of who she is, and was, is formed from this event.

Stella's self-concept is analogous to the butterfly's life cycle. As the butterfly goes through two completely different stages which are separated by a metamorphosis, so Stella sees two life stages with a transition period between them. Before her daughter died she describes herself as "just a regular housewife. I didn't know anything about anything else. I didn't know anything about

art." She looks back at her preartist self as vacuous. She feels she did not have an identity. Then, "My daughter's death changed the direction of my life." She described her own metamorphosis:

> When my daughter died, I needed something to have my mind on so I started art school at night. I made little things because she was doing those kinds of things. I was just carrying her little life on. Then later, after a year or so, it began to be me. I was doing it for myself too. It got to be more and more in me, and she was kind of sleeping. In fact, I had to do it. It got to be a compulsion. I was working full-time at the office, but doing my art work every spare moment I had, learning and studying more and more.

She set up her first art studio shortly after her daughter died and began teaching art in the evenings at highschools and colleges and on weekends at her own studio while she was still working full-time. Her energy was ceaseless. When she retired from the secretarial job she held for thirty-five years, she plunged into expanding her studio, teaching more classes, and doing more projects. Her identity as an artist blossomed when she retired from her job at the age of 62.

She has been expressing her artist self to its fullest capacity for the past twenty years. She has taught several hundred students and launched the artistic careers of many of them. She shows no signs of slowing down or stopping her art activities. And why should she? For through them, she is able to continue expressing connections among the themes of her experience to fully integrate her sense of self.

The Social Context

As I noted in Chapter One, the life history reveals subjective experience to provide us with an individual's own construction of reality. I have presented these three case studies both to illustrate the ways in which particular life experiences are organized, interpreted and symbolically connected to become themes, and to show how themes may be viewed as the building blocks of identity.

In addition to being the product of personal experience, themes are also the product of one's social context. These three case studies have emphasized subjective experience and thus tend to portray the individual only as an active agent--picking and choosing among experiences in order to construct themes and create a self-concept. But themes also derive from the limitations and opportunities inherent in the social system. The structural and historical situations--including 1) socio-economic background, 2) family patterns, 3) ethnicity, 4) rural/urban residence, 5) education, 6) work experience and 7) mobility, which I outlined for the entire study group in Chapter Two--also contribute to the formation of themes in the individual life.

Much of the gerontological literature concerns social and structural factors impinging on elderly populations. These studies, for the most part, bear on adaptation to old age (Binstock and Shanas 1976). In contrast, my study focuses on social and structural factors as they contribute to the construction of identity among elderly individuals. The factors listed above, which I will describe in some detail

for Millie, Ben and Stella in the following pages, were derived from several readings of the autobiographical material. These are the factors which emerged as salient for these informants.

A full analysis of themes would consider both subjective experience in its own terms and the contextual social experience within which individual lives are lived. This dissertation primarily addresses the meaning of individual experience within a social context; it does not give equal weight to the impact of the social context per se on the formation of themes. However, I wish to consider briefly some of the structural forces in the lives of Millie, Ben and Stella and to discuss their contribution to the way in which their themes appear now.

Millie did not dwell on her impoverished childhood in our conversations; yet she alluded to it often enough to reveal that it is significant in the formation of some themes. For instance, we saw that she has always craved social status. Her vibrant description of the social meaning of piano lessons when she was young illustrates how she struggled for status throughout her life but was rarely able to achieve it. The need for social status remains in old age, and since she realizes she cannot acquire it through her own devices and did not acquire it through birth, she tries to claim it now through association with affluent people.

Millie's parents were immigrants, a fact with which she never felt comfortable. In one breath Millie told me that her mother was German, but that she was "thoroughly Americanized,

she didn't speak with an accent or anything." She wanted to make sure I understood that though her parents were from another country, they were as much a part of the melting pot as was possible. Millie was ashamed of her parentage as she was growing up and she struggled to be part of some idealized, purely American culture. The immigrant family was, of course, tied to the poverty and gave fuel to Millie's lifelong strivings for status and affluence. The piano lessons, in addition to symbolizing economic status, also symbolize her break away from the traditions of her "peasant" parents. Through the lessons she was initiating an activity truly her own.

We recall that Millie's need for love and affection was not fulfilled during her second and third marriages. This need probably originated in her childhood, as a partial result of the structure of her family and the type of life they led. She was one of ten or twelve children, in a household beset by financial hardship.[4] Her mother had no time for her but was preoccupied with running the large household and worrying about her father's flighty behavior and lack of ability to support them all. Her father was not around much. She told me: "My father wasn't a homebody, he was out late at night always, and it drove my mother wild. I remember how unhappy mother was because he was a card player and gambler." Millie did not get attention from her brothers either, some of whom were quite a bit older than she and who were out of the house most of the time earning a living. And her sister provided competition, not companionship. Poverty, the immigrant status of her parents, the structure of her family

of origin--each contributed to her insecurity and her need, currently expressed in themes, for status, acceptance, love and attention.

Ben's insecurity, expressed in financial rather than emotional terms, also got its start during his childhood through the emotional climate that pervaded his household, if not actual poverty. Though his father was present and provided the basic necessities for the family, both his parents were apparently always anxious that some catastrophe might topple their precarious economic footing. Ben grew up in an environment of tension and nervousness. He observed and learned only two responses to the hardships of life--worry and religious faith. We have seen how these two behavior patterns, established early, influenced the decisions he made throughout life and into old age. They were the source of his frustrations and shaped the themes through which he now constructs his self-concept.

In contrast, Stella was quite poor during her young and middle adulthood, but she vividly remembers her secure early childhood and talks about it at length as the happiest time in her life. She describes her family as close-knit, loving and always there for her in those early years. She grew up in a relatively small family, quite isolated from other households in the rural Southwest. Family members spent much time together, working the farm and providing support and entertainment for one another. During her early years, the family was a stable unit, full of love. The security

established in this environment probably contributed to her ability to cope well with the hardships she later faced, first as a divorced woman with a child to support, and then when the child died. In addition, it probably enabled her to recover from that tragedy and go on to express herself in the creative sphere.[5]

One structural factor in the difference between the early family life of Stella and that of Millie and Ben is the rural/urban contrast. In isolated farming households when Stella was a child, relationships had to amiable for the family to survive; there was nobody else for miles around to provide a support network. In addition, farm family members shared the specific tasks and overall goals of making the farm a viable concern. Urban family members generally do not now, and never did, share as many activities as rural family members (Williams 1970:59-80). Subsequently, their lives are not as intertwined. In an urban setting, the peer group and work environment potentially provide greater support, companionship and activity focus than the family.

In Stella's case, the close-knit family was a positive force and established her security. Millie needed that closeness but did not have it as her family concentrated their attention on the outside world and had little to give her. In Ben's case, the family was united by a religious faith which he did not share. His feeling, established as a child, of being an outsider has remained with him and contributed to his theme of social isolation. And his inability to commit himself to religion as his siblings did and as his mother wanted him to set the stage for frustration in various spheres of endeavor.

Education occupies a relatively large place in the life histories of these three people and in the stories of the other informants as well. One reason education is so prominent in these autobiographies is due to its historical role in American society. Williams (1970:282-322) notes the widespread "faith in education" which has characterized America for over a century and which is upheld primarily by two notions: 1) that a democracy requires an educated citizenry to participate in public decision-making, and 2) that education brings economic reward and social status to the individual and security to the nation. The material I collected illustrates that my informants have shared this faith in education. Their retrospective accounts stress the belief that education would lead to occupational success, economic reward and/or social status. Williams' other reasons are not so apparent in these peoples' discussions. But besides being a means to an end, education is viewed by my informants as being intrinsically worthwhile.

From the stories of Millie, Ben and Stella, I learned that education was valued in all their families, both for its intrinsic merits and for the goals to which it could lead, but in each case, historical factors and family situations played a part in the amount and type of education each informant received as a child and young adult, the attitudes which accompanied schooling, and the memorable aspects of the education process. When I asked Millie to tell me about her childhood, the first thing that came to her mind was going to school. Again, here was an opportunity to get away from her "foreign" parents and join the melting pot. She talked about school mainly in terms of her peer group and emphasized that

her girlfriends from the elementary years were her closest confidants through the period of her first marriage. It is interesting to note that though she wanted to separate herself from her European heritage, her four closest school friends, who were the best friends she ever had and whom she describes in some detail, were from German-Jewish immigrant families as she was. The childhood neighborhood was not ethnically homogeneous--she also talks about learning Spanish "from the children who lived upstairs"--but her best friends were from her own ethnic group.

In highschool, she took business courses because her family needed her to gather employment skills. When she was 16, she had to quit school and work to contribute to the household. Her eldest brother placed her in her first job as bookkeeper and stenographer in a jewelry store. Millie says she enjoyed the subjects she studied. I do not know her feelings about the termination of her schooling because, as she recalls that life period now, meeting her first husband stands out as the critical event. Ending her formal education has no special meaning.

In contrast, education emerges as a pivotal factor in shaping Ben's entire life history; it acts as one explanatory mechanism for the course his life has taken and the development of his identity. Though he emphasized religion as the key structural theme in his life history, he talks about his childhood and early relationship to his parents in terms of education as well. For example, his self-image, his fears of failure and notions of success, his worries about pleasing his parents--all are defined through his schooling. I asked Ben

to describe himself as a child. He replied, "I was a good student." When I asked him what gave him the most pleasure and what upset him most during his early years, he answered: "Schoolwork. My parents reinforced that. If my report card was good, they were happy. And when I flunked arithmetic, they weren't happy...School was very important. That's about all I could have failed at."

The type of education he was given limited his social development and contributed greatly to the somber side of his identity. He was sent to a small Catholic boarding school at the age of 14. There, for four years, he was heavily burdened and totally preoccupied with the decision of whether or not to become a priest, to accept the choice made for him by his family and superiors at school, or to break away. His education and life at school was a purely serious business; he recalls no fun, pranks, friendships or excitement. The cloistered, religious, all-male environment did not give him any social skills with which to negotiate the secular, male/female world outside. He graduated from highschool frightened, extremely shy, without friends, and without a support structure when he decided not to become a priest. His education experience helped shape his theme of social isolation and his inability to engage in meaningful social activity.

But on the positive side, his higher education was the vehicle through which he escaped the priesthood. He thought of himself as an intellectual, not as God's servant or the community's service provider; this self-concept motivated him

to finally reject the path on which his parents had placed him and go on to college and the teaching profession. He said of that life period, "I had a great yen for the intellectual life. If somebody had offered me a job, if I could have gotten a Ph.D. and been a professor for the rest of my life, maybe I would have been happy, I don't know."

We know that Ben conceives of his life without turning points. This is the only place in his autobiography where he speaks of a potential turning point, an opportunity that he missed. But in the same paragraph, he goes on to justify his lack of Ph.D. and non-academic career through his theme, the need for financial security: "I doubt I would have been happy. In the academic life, they're terribly concerned about money, until they get to be tenured professors. It's not a nice relationship..." The irony, of course, is that though he chose a job that offered financial security, he has continued to worry about money his entire life and to regret that boring lifestyle. The discussion of his ambivalence over an academic career points out the need for him to explain why he did not take a chance and pursue something which might have satisfied him. Education allowed him to escape the priesthood, but it did not, ultimately, aid Ben in finding a satisfying niche in the world.

For Stella, education has been a vehicle through which she expressed her competitive spirit and drive to accomplish and her desire to know more and become a better artist. She attended small country schools; there were only six students in her graduating highschool class. Yet, her educational

horizons were always broad and her parents encouraged this. As a youngster, she competed in state-wide debates and gave speeches all over the county to school and church groups. When she graduated from her academically limited highschool, she moved to a larger city for another year of school so that she could take necessary courses for college. Proud and excited to have been accepted to college, she began the year the First World War started. She observed her sister and some of her friends getting war-related jobs and earning more money than they ever had before, and she decided that she could do the same and that the war was an opportunity for her to create an independent life. So she quit school, took some business courses, and immediately got a relatively high-paying clerical job.

Her desire for more education reemerged about ten years later when she was working and taking care of her child. She read voluminously on her own and attended night school for four years where she wrote papers and engaged in lively seminars and debates. Over the years, she acquired a solid, well-rounded liberal arts education. A complete set of the Great Books of Western Civilization[6] is in her library; she has studied most of them. More than the other informants, she has internalized the value of education for its own sake.

After her child died, she channeled her desire for learning into the study of art. She says that her art teachers have been the most influential people in her life (aside from her mother and daughter) as they knew how to help bring into being her artistic self. She feels she owes the development of her aesthetic sense, as well as her technical training, to them.

The First and Second World Wars do not play prominent roles in the life histories of Millie, Ben or Stella. As I discussed in Chapter Two, my informants do not set their autobiographies on the stage of history; they do not perceive themselves as actors in and products of historical circumstances. In that chapter I also mentioned that autobiographies tend to be structured by present situations; historical events are not usually recalled as critical forces or causal factors in the formation of identity or construction of the life story.

We see that Stella viewed World War I as an opportunity to earn her independence. When she got her first job, she moved out of her relatives' home into her own apartment. Though the war was on, she describes those years as some of the happiest in her life. She liked her job; she established her own social life and was very busy. She became engaged twice explaining: "That's what we all did then to please the boys who were going off to war. It was all propaganda. I broke off the relationships as soon as they returned home." The other women in the study group who were in their twenties during the First World War describe those years as Stella does--as an opportunity to become emancipated. Stella was an independent, adventurous young woman anyway. The war gave her the first chance to experience her freedom; this was its primary effect on her life.

I cannot know the impact of the Second World War on Stella because her daughter's death at about the same time (1940) is the critical event which overshadows and colors all memories of those war years. She does not mention any war-related experiences and I cannot infer any from her autobiography.

Although Ben was in his early thirties at the time, World War II had the effect on him that World War I had on Stella--it broadened his horizons, exposed him to different sorts of people and changed his ideas about a profession. As Ben interprets it, it was not the fact of war per se that brought about these changes, rather it was the specific experience of being in the army--being thrown in close quarters with types of people he had never encountered in his sheltered religious upbringing or college and teaching years--that made him see himself in new ways in relation to other people and a larger environment. His own self-esteem was strengthened as he discovered how "dumb" most of the other men were. On the other hand, he began to perceive the narrow focus of his own world view and background and to fear the future because of these limitations. Perhaps if he had not been exposed to such a variety of men, he would have continued teaching highschool and been content with that.

Millie does not mention either war in her account of her life. She married her first husband a year or so before the First World War began. Looking back now, she views that marriage as the only perfect period in her life and she does not recall as meaningful or worthy of discussion any war-related details. Of that time, she only mentioned to me the love in that marriage and the thriving jewelry business. I have inferred from her story that her next marriage took place during World War II and only lasted until a few years after that war. That husband, twenty years her senior, did not serve in the war. Millie's discussion of those years dwells only on the difficulties of that marriage and her children and jobs.

Millie's framework for her life story is purely personal; she does not relate her existence to a broader social context or to historical events at all. The absence of these factors points to the degree of emphasis on the theme that structures her autobiography, her three marriages, and the theme by which she categorizes her experiences, affective ties. These themes have such overriding importance for Millie now that the larger social context seems to be of no consequence to her. The social environment of her childhood provides the only contextual description in her autobiography. The impact of poverty and a large, immigrant family clearly has more meaning for the construction of her identity now than do the wars.

Geographic mobility figures largely in each of these informants' histories. All three left home after highschool to create lives for themselves and all had the chance to move around the country many times over the years. The context of the moves however, and the way they are interpreted are different in each case.

Millie moved more than ten times in her life; she moved each time she married and when each marriage ended; she moved for her own health and that of a child and a husband; she moved to be close to her children and when she could no longer care for all her needs. An interpretive pattern emerged as she talked about these moves--they were all dislocations, forced upon her by others or by external circumstances, not moves she made out of personal desire. It is easy to see how this mobility, viewed negatively as being brought about by outside forces, contributed to her theme of straw-in-the-wind.

Even the first move away from home, to live with the man she loved, is seen now as traumatic and not of her own choosing: "We went to live in Staten Island because he had this job there. I had never been away from home; I was a little homebody. I got very upset living there. It was like living in Europe, away from home. I became ill and was brought back to my mother..." She moved during her second marriage because that husband wanted to be away from her children; the move did not improve their relationship. During her third marriage, she moved several times, looking for a better climate for that sick husband, but the moves did not improve his health and only exhausted her and disrupted her employment.

In Millie's case study above, I mentioned her various moves after her third husband died--how she was "pulled" from place to place, how her children "decided" where she should go. Each move represents a major upheaval in her life, and she had many. The moves, instead of resolving situations, only contributed to her frustration of not being in control of her own fate and her conception of herself during most of her life as a straw-in-the-wind.

Geographic mobility was seen as a potentially positive force in both Ben and Stella's young lives, an opportunity to seek their fortunes and make something of themselves in the world. It was a key to freedom and independence. However, Ben was unable to fully experience the freedom mobility offered him. True, his move away from home to attend college gave him independence from the influence of his family. But his subsequent moves, which accompanied the transitions in his life--

teaching, army, marriage, job--did not give him freedom in any sense. He could not take the opportunity mobility offered him in those earlier years because the "sober," "steady," "burdened" side of his self-concept was too powerful. And it is still too strong to allow mobility to have much impact on his behavior: though he now wants to travel and realize his "carefree" side, he is unable to do so.

Stella moved away from home at 18 to attend college and support herself. In her early 20s, she moved across the country first to explore America, then to marry. In her youth, mobility allowed her to be adventurous and express her independent spirit. She has not moved from this city since she arrived here in 1925. Over the years, she has developed a meaningful way to fully express her freedom and independence through her non-conformist lifestyle and her artistic pursuits, and mobility is no longer a relevant factor in her life.

Development in Old Age

Taken together, Erikson's theory of life cycle stages and the interactionist model of situational adjustment explain a great deal about the dynamics of change and continuity in the self. Erikson's last three stages concern the resolution of what he considers to be the major crises of adulthood: intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, and ego integrity vs. despair. In his scheme, the developing adult identity needs to establish intimacy, "the capacity to commit himself to concrete affiliations and partnerships," or isolation will result. The crisis of generativity concerns "establishing and guiding the next generation;" it includes both productivity and creativity but is not limited to them alone. Ego integrity implies resolution of the issues inherent in the preceding seven stages: "It is the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions" (1963:263-269).

Erikson maintains that every person, to become a mature adult who can function adequately in society, must develop all the positive ego qualities to some degree. He emphasizes that the achievement of these qualities is a matter of degree; it is not an all or nothing event. His theory has more explanatory usefulness than stage theory (Kohlberg 1964; Loevinger 1966) for two reasons. First, Erikson explains that psychosocial development proceeds by a series of critical steps but the stages, though dependent on the proper sequence, are not mutually exclusive. While emphasis is on the resolution of one conflict at a time, the individual integrates all

qualities, in some form, throughout the life span. Second, the stages, especially the last three, are not tied to precise chronological age or certain periods in the life span. This flexibility in the theory allows for more "fit" in individual cases and takes into account individual differences in development.

Becker (1968a, 1968b) formulated the concept of situational adjustment to explain how participation in the social system produces changes in adulthood. From his interactionist perspective, change in the self "consists of the continual changes that occur in the person's notions of how others are likely to respond to his actions and the meanings he imputes to his own actions by virtue of the imputations others have made earlier" (1968b:203). Situational adjustment refers to the appraisal and interpretation of contingencies that arise as an individual enters a new environment or engages in new relationships. He or she incorporates the new notions of the responses of others into the self-concept to anticipate change and make the necessary behavioral adaptations. But change in the self-concept does not occur with every new situation, Becker notes, as some aspects of the self are stable in the face of new stimuli or situational pressures, and he points to the need for analytic mechanisms that will explain the stable aspects of self.

The processes elaborated by Erikson and Becker are evident to varying degrees in the lives of Millie, Ben and Stella. Now, I will discuss the themes that emerged in their life stories in the context of these theories in order to provide a framework

for better understanding the dynamics of change and continuity in the self in old age. I would like to suggest, and will try to demonstrate, that themes may be viewed as conceptual illustrations of developmental stage preoccupations and their resolution and as the symbolic means of both adjusting to change and maintaining continuity.

It is clear that Millie never fully resolved the crisis of intimacy, never found a solution which satisfied her. Her major theme attests to her preoccupation with this stage. The organization of experience in terms of the degree of closeness in relationships and the perceptual structuring of situations in order to be assured of love consume her. All of her current activities revolve around the realization of intimacy; it is the most meaningful conceptual category in her life. Because of this, much is at stake in her interactions. If a friendship is broken, if intimacy is not achieved, Millie's equilibrium is threatened and the meaning of her life is called into question. I observed her questioning the meaning of her "intimate" relationships on several occasions. For example, when her best friend started to spend much time sitting with and talking to other people, and when a previously friendly aide seemingly ignored her, she became quite depressed and cried easily for several days at a time. She stated to me, "They're all strangers to me. I can't count on any of them."

Though Millie is deeply immersed in the struggle for intimacy, I do not wish to imply that her preoccupation is in any way pathological; Erikson emphasized that resolution of

each crisis is a matter of degree. His final stage, ego integrity, entails an emotional integration of the successes and failures of all the preceding years, as well as an integration of the discrepant aspects of the self, and Millie, for all her conflicts, partially does integrate her frustrations and achievements in the construction of her life story.

One way she approaches Erikson's final stage is through her current integration of the failure of her marriages with the successes of her work history. Situational adjustment plays a prominent part in the construction of those two themes. Millie viewed her marriages at the outset as opportunities for security and companionship. They did not turn out that way and thus caused her much frustration. With the end of each marriage, she had to reappraise the meaning and direction of her life and make decisions about how to go on. We recall that her primary mode of adjustment to her marriages was through employment, and that she now defines herself as worthwhile and successful in terms of work. The theme of personal success has emerged from her manner of adjustment to the difficult marriages and their termination. Now, she integrates the two themes in her autobiography by countering the disappointment of the marriages with the triumph of positive self-esteem established in work related encounters.

Her more recent adjustment technique is her appraisal of her move to the institution and subsequent change in self-presentation style from straw-in-the-wind to manipulating interaction. She claims to have changed styles in order to get what she wanted from her new environment. We saw how she

has been able to reorganize the institutional routine, structure her friendships and invest casual encounters with affect through the creation of this stylistic theme. Moreover, through this adjustment technique, she accomplishes two tasks: first, she is able to maintain a defensible self-image through the creation of situations in which she acquires moral worth and social status.[7] Second, she establishes continuity in her identity by preserving the meaningful themes in her repertoire--the existence of intimate relationships and the successful worker role.

Mandelbaum has suggested a framework for analyzing adaptation in the life history which is helpful in understanding the evolution of Millie's themes:

> Adaptation is a built-in process, because every person must, in the course of his life, alter some of his established patterns of behavior to cope with new conditions. Each person changes his ways in order to maintain continuity, whether of group participation or social expectation or self-image or simply survival. Some of these new conditions are imposed by his own physical development. Others arise from changing external conditions, whether of custom or climate, family or society. (1973:181; his italics).

Millie's case provides an example of how an individual is able to make certain changes in order to preserve continuity. She adjusts to a new situation by creating a new self-presentation style and, through the change, is able to maintain continuity of identity. Taken together, the notions of adaptation and situational adjustment provide us with a way of studying the relationship of change to continuity in the individual life. This framework is, I believe, a most useful one for studying identity dynamics in old age as it reveals the process by

which salient aspects of self are preserved, interpreted, and negotiated in response to a lifetime of personal development and social interaction.

Like Millie, Ben never resolved the crisis of intimacy; his behavior patterns in relation to this issue, however, are quite different from hers. Whereas Millie craved devotion as a child from her parents and siblings, wanted intimacy with her husbands, and now attempts to create closeness in all interactions, Ben has steadfastly avoided intimacy, saying he prefers to "avoid complications" and "take the easy way out." He is critical of his detached, uncommitted approach to relationships and does not like it, but he is unable or unwilling to change this behavior pattern. We have seen that his lack of active engagement with people plays a great part in the formation of his identity because it is expressed in three themes: emotional vacuum, social isolation and passivity, which together strengthen and reinforce his divided self-concept. It is somewhat ironic that the failure to achieve intimacy is what allows Ben's dichotomy of self to flourish and be maintained into old age. In his case, the need for continuity of identity outweighs the need for intimacy in relationships and the full realization of that developmental stage.

Ben never found a satisfactory solution to the issue of generativity either. He chose not to have children, saying it would have been too difficult. Thus he has denied himself fulfillment manifested in the guidance of the next generation. He has a deep sense of stagnation in other spheres of life as

well. He endured a most boring job for thirty years, sacrificing professional stimulation, challenge and productivity for economic security. And he is greatly frustrated by the fact that he never became a good writer. But his creativity in that pursuit was inhibited and finally overpowered by his sense of competition with other writers and the high value he placed on economic compensation for writing. He has never been able to invest himself in generative activity and now he feels he sacrificed a great deal for the kind of secure and uninspired life he chose.

How does he approach Erikson's last stage? How does he adapt to the disappointments of his past? Though frustrations and conflict remain, Ben is able to integrate his past experiences to create order and meaning in his life now through the theme of religion.

We have seen that religion was a limitation for Ben through his early and middle years; it provided an ideal which he could not achieve and a guide from which he deviated. It stifled the development of his "carefree" self. He could never change his image of religion to fit his behavior. It is interesting that now, late in his life, religion has become the key to attaining integrity. Religion acts as an integrative tool for Ben in several ways: first, he views it as the way to come closer to God and gain solace in old age. In this way, he can achieve intimacy. Second, he tries to be generous through monetary contributions to a variety of causes and charities. Through this act, he approaches generativity as he can feel that he has some productive impact on his environment. Third, religion

acts as a stabilizing element in the tensions inherent in his dichotomous self. It is always there as an ideational filter through which to sift the important from the unimportant, the valuable from the irrelevant. The theme of religion allows Ben to accept the course his life has taken. Furthermore, it provides him with hope and optimism about life after death, feelings which contribute to a profound sense of rightness about the meaning of his life.

The stability and all-pervasiveness of the themes religion, detached interaction style, and need for financial security become even more apparent when we view them in the context of situational adjustment. We recall that Ben did not mention any turning points or behavioral changes as he constructed his life story. The transitions at different life periods--army, career change, marriage, widowhood--do not constitute categories of meaning for him. He interprets his life in terms of "slow, enduring patience," not change or adjustment. My observations of his transition to widowhood affirm his conceptions of constancy. I knew Ben for two years before his wife died; I visited with him and collected his life history about one year after her death. I could see no lifestyle change in that period. I mentioned earlier that he had not even 'moved' into the rest of his house, preferring the space he could call his own while his wife was alive. And though he is now unencumbered, he can not make plans to travel or to rearrange his life in order to take advantage of his new status and the freedom it brings him.

I believe that his themes, created from much earlier life experiences, explain his inability to alter his behavior

patterns or self-conception now. Millie speaks of her most recent life transition in terms of changing behavioral styles, both to survive in the institution with her mental health intact and to preserve continuity in the aspects of identity most valuable to her. Ben did not interpret the transition to widowhood (or, I suspect, any other life change) as a threat to survival or self-image. Thus he did not have to make any alterations in order to maintain what he considered important. His themes provide order, meaning, and satisfaction both as he adapts to widowhood and as he reflects back on his entire life.

Stella's identity emerges from her understanding of art, productive work and the creative process; she approaches the crises of intimacy and generativity in terms of these, and the other closely related themes in her life. She has no intimate ties now and none stand out as she tells her life story. She has not avoided personal commitment as Ben has, but neither has she sought out intimate relationships as Millie has. Full realization of intimacy has been thwarted by her strivings to realize the artistic aspects of herself. Nevertheless, she talks about the need for intimacy, and certain themes in her life illustrate the ways in which she attempts to fulfill that need, though only from the perspective of her artist self-image and art-related lifestyle.

We saw that she perceives the themes of selflessness and trust to be critical both in the formation of close relationships and the maintenance of the studio. These themes, especially trust, are the avenues through which she tries to achieve intimacy. She attempts to substitute a feeling of closeness

and mutual trust with the people who flow through her life for the lasting, meaningful partnerships that are the key to the complete expression of this developmental stage. This substitution is only partially successful. When others betray her trust, she is crushed. And, when her selfless behavior is met by greater demands rather than kindness and appreciation, her frustration mounts, and she wonders where her generosity is leading her.

She approaches generativity, too, through her art-related themes. Stella was fully invested in raising her child, but that means of expressing generativity was cut off when the child died. So, she rechanneled her investment in the future by constructing the new themes of productivity and creativity which are manifested in her life as the need to make better and better art all the time. Productivity is valued by the entire study group, yet Stella places more emphasis on productivity in her own life at the present time than do any other informants. When I wanted to know what plans she had for the future, she replied with conviction: "I am going to make a masterpiece!" And when I asked her at the beginning of a new year what resolutions she had made, she answered, "I want to turn out 365 pieces of art work this year, one every day." Her desire both to produce in quantity and to create something of permanence can be seen as a way to achieve generativity. Since she could not do it by nurturing the artistic promise of her daughter, she can try to create something of lasting import to the art world through her own tireless, creative efforts.

Generativity is also partially achieved in the way she replaced the role of mother with that of teacher. She has taught at least a dozen artists since they were children, thus investing in their development, and she has helped shape the artistic careers of many other young people by teaching both in her studio and in the schools. She certainly has contributed to the establishment of the next generation of artists. This role is very important to her still; she feels she is failing as a teacher when her own work lacks inspiration or when she is not producing new work. Her need to continue teaching, coupled with her desire to create more and more, illustrate the salience of this developmental stage even in old age and the ways in which one person is attempting to resolve it.

Her theme of selflessness also allows her to partially resolve the crisis of generativity. Of this stage, Erikson states:

> The fashionable insistence on dramatizing the dependence of children on adults often blinds us to the dependence of the older generation on the younger one. Mature man needs to be needed, and maturity needs guidance as well as encouragement from what has been produced and must be taken care of (1963:266-267).

Stella needs the students and artists who work at her studio and flow through her life; she needs to be needed by the generation she is striving to guide. Her theme of selflessness, in addition to ordering her priorities and motivating much of her behavior in the studio, symbolizes her dependence on the younger, student generation. For example, though frustrated by lack of time to pursue her own work, she says she is "lost" when she does have time to herself. She has so fully invested

her identity in the artists that, if they all left, I suspect Stella would become disoriented and depressed. She would not interpret the time to herself as freedom to produce great art because her own creative process emerges and is nurtured, to a great extent, from her relationship with the artists around her. She needs the demands of the next generation in order to continue being an artist.

The resolution of the stage of ego integrity depends upon the degree to which one has emotionally integrated and adapted to the experiences of a lifetime. One illustration of Stella's integrative capacity is the connections she is able to draw among the themes in her life. They are all related to her artist self-image and they reinforce one another as she continues to express her artist self in the ways described above.

The themes through which Stella describes herself and organizes her life story were given shape by the major turning point in her life, the death of her child. She interpreted the task of adjusting to this tragic event as an opportunity to restructure her lifestyle and in fact, to redefine her identity. She said she was not an artist before the death of her daughter: "I didn't know anything about art or anything; I was just a regular housewife." She became an artist, and the art-related themes evolved to shape her current self-concept when she started to live through the memory of her daughter. This one event triggered the reappraisal of and subsequent far-reaching changes in her relationship to her environment and definition of herself.

The variability of the meaning of situational adjustment in the individual life is striking when we compare adjustment in the lives of Millie, Ben and Stella. Stella's case provides yet a different example of the processes of change and continuity in relation to the self and the way these processes are called into play in the construction of identity. Millie created the theme of employment success to integrate her marriage failure with her work history; she made a specific thematic change when she moved to the Home in order to preserve continuity of identity. Ben apparently did not need to make any thematic alterations to maintain continuity or order as he constructed his autobiography. In contrast, Stella created a new repertoire of themes so she could adapt to the personal loss and build meaning into her life. Over the years, she has integrated these themes through the lifestyle she has created. Now, she resolves this final developmental stage on a daily basis as she continues to express her artist identity to its fullest capacity.

To summarize, I wish to suggest that, taken together, Erikson's theory of the life cycle and Becker's notion of situational adjustment are useful models for studying developmental processes as they explain much about the dynamics of change and continuity in the individual life. I found that the concept of theme may be used as a tool to illustrate and explicate both models. Themes demonstrate developmental stage conflicts and the degree to which they are resolved; they also provide a symbolic means for understanding adjustment to change and maintenance of continuity.

4. THEMES AND VALUES

The preceding chapter has emphasized the unique properties of themes in each autobiography in order to show how they provide a method for analyzing life histories and for understanding developmental processes in old age. Now, I wish to shift perspectives and focus on the aspect of themes which is shared among the informants of this study group. In my analysis of the 15 cases of the subsample, I found there to be an underlying criterion by which themes are selected and created in each life; this criterion is values. I wish to stress that I did not derive a set of values from the life histories as I derived the individual themes. Rather, as I read the texts, I discovered that the concept of cultural value, taken from the anthropological literature, revealed similarities among the autobiographies--similarities resulting from my informants' participation in a common social milieu, with a generally shared set of symbolic goals and standards.

Values are highly abstract constructs drawn from the experiences of living in a particular society during a certain historical period. Values emerge from, and in turn are shaped by, the interactions among individuals and institutions in a social system. C. Kluckhohn (1951), F. Kluckhohn (1953), Williams (1970) and others have defined values as guidelines for behavior and standards by which goals are chosen and

decisions are made. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) emphasize that values are criteria which give order and direction to ongoing actions as these relate to solving "common human" problems. In addition, values provide a means of weighing and choosing solutions to everyday problems posed by living in a society and confronting adaptive dilemmas that occur over the life span. They also help give direction to behavior in situations of conflict and choice and lend justification to already performed action. In the preceding case illustrations, we have seen how themes function similarly to categorize experience, guide decision-making and explain choices in three lives. How then, are the concepts of value and theme to be operationally distinguished from one another?

The difference between "themes" and "values" is to be found in the information they convey about the subjects. Themes identify the personal, idiosyncratic ways of experiencing and communicating meaning in the individual life--the ways in which people interpret experience so as to give unique internal continuity and structure to the self. Themes are based on tacit cultural assumptions about what is acceptable, but these assumptions merely provide the background for the explanation of uniqueness.

Values, on the other hand, emphasize the individual's conformity to widely held and fairly explicit indices of social worth. As such, values clearly fix the individual in an historical-cultural cohort, that is, in a group with common ideals derived from common experiences. My goal in this chapter

is to clarify this distinction and illustrate the interweaving of my informants' perceptions of their uniqueness with their dedication to shared norms.[1]

There is more consensus in the social science literature on how values function in any given society than on the development of a list of discrete values, "value systems," or "value-orientations" for a cultural group. In his discussion of American national character for example, Hsu (1972) reviews much of the literature on values and describes the difficulties, contradictions and ultimate lack of explanatory power inherent in cataloging particular values and classifying them at different levels of abstraction. I mention this problem because I have selected a number of values to highlight in this chapter. They are: achievement, success, productivity, work, progress, social usefulness, independence, self-reliance and individual initiative. I do not claim to have identified a complete set of values for this study group. Neither am I concerned with ranking the importance of these values nor reconciling any inconsistencies among them.

Rather, I have chosen to discuss these values for three reasons: 1) numerous writers (cf: Arensberg and Niehoff 1975; Gorer 1948; Kluckhohn and Kluckhohn 1947; Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1961; Mead 1943; Williams 1970) have described them as characteristic of American society, 2) they are shared, though to different degrees, by all members of this study population, and 3) my analysis of the case material reveals that these values have the strongest influence on the formation of my informants' life themes. I do not claim that these values are necessarily

"general" or "modal" American values. Instead, I want to emphasize that they characterize the participants in this study--a group of elderly, West Coast, urban, white, middle-class people with the backgrounds and qualities outlined in Chapter Two. In order to clarify what I mean by the values listed above, I will briefly define these terms for this study group before describing how they interrelate with themes in the context of the life history.

Achievement--the attainment of a goal which brings satisfaction and heightens self-esteem--is probably a universal objective. For my informants, achievement is marked by singular, personal success in some concrete endeavor, whether it be the creation of a visible object, the ability to adequately perform a task, or the acknowledgment of one's expertise by others. An achievement is the result of some tangible behavior, purposefully enacted.

Achievement and success are to be reached through productive activity, especially work. It is not enough for these study participants to "keep busy;" their behavior must be oriented towards some pragmatic end in order to have meaning. Arensberg and Niehoff (1975) note that in American society, a person is judged by his work, by his ability to earn a living, contribute to the welfare of community life, or "get ahead" in one's occupation. Moreover, in this culture a person's identity is defined by his or her work role and in fact, one can barely be considered a person at all except in the context of what one "does," what purpose one has in the world. For my informants,

self-esteem is intimately related to the work role; their morale is highest when they feel they are working diligently and being as productive as possible.

Activity directed towards the attainment of specific goals and personal accomplishments underscores commitment to the concept of progress. Arensberg and Niehoff (1975) and Williams (1970) describe the American view of progress as faith in the future of changing institutions and the development of technology. My informants tend to see progress in terms of approaching personal behavior goals such as: "overcoming my shyness," "getting out and being with people more often," and "trying to be more patient with others." They believe that, with personal effort, their own lives can be made better and better.

In a society where progress is assumed to be possible and activity is directed towards solving problems, humanitarian behavior, too, is evaluated in the context of performance and achievement. For example, service to community organizations, philanthropy through formal institutions and personal acts of generosity all are pragmatic expressions of concern for others that can be measured and judged. For this study group, such behavior is defined as socially useful. That is, giving time or money to others is viewed in terms of both the <u>results</u> it will bring to the larger community and the <u>contribution</u> being made by the individual.

In American society generally, each of these values accentuates the autonomy and worth of the individual. For my informants, individualism is expressed primarily in three ideal character traits. The first is independence, the ability to

provide for one's own physical and emotional needs. The more frail and infirm study participants, while realistically acknowledging their partial dependence on others, also hold this ideal. They attempt to be as autonomous as they can, considering their specific health needs, and they exert much energy to avoid being "a burden," "an inconvenience," or a "third wheel."

The second trait that contributes to individualism is self-reliance. Hsu defines it: "...under this ideal every individual is his own master, in control of his own destiny, and will advance and regress in society only according to his own efforts" (1972:250). To this statement I would add the notion of self-determination: with enough personal intention and effort, almost all obstacles can be overcome, the environment can be manipulated and one can improve oneself. The third expression of individualism in the data I collected is initiative. These people not only stress the need for firm resolve and personal responsibility in action, they also emphasize the importance of taking the first step in an endeavor. They maintain a feeling that nobody else can, or should, do things for them and that they must create their own successes, from scratch.

Taken together, these values provide parameters for the way in which my informants construct themes to determine priorities, organize their autobiographies, explain the sequence of events, and view themselves in relation to others. But I also found abstract values and individual themes to have a reciprocal relationship, that is, themes both emerge from and

give form and substance to generalized values. In the following pages, I will try to show how themes function to make these values situationally specific, personally relevant, and definable to the individual. I wish to suggest that individual life themes are 1) a vehicle through which discrete values may be inferred, and 2) a framework for understanding how values operate dynamically, that is, how they are interpreted in individual behavior patterns, how they have evolved over the life span, and how they are maintained into old age in the course of ongoing, ever-changing social interaction.

Mary

Mary, 72 years old, evaluates her life and recalls past experiences in the framework of a waste-productivity dichotomy. This is one of the dominant themes in her life history. Her identity has been largely shaped by the way she defines productivity and the value she attaches to it. Productivity is any tangible, "marketable skill" that can be channeled into a specific job or task and which leads to a clearly stated goal or profession. She considers the absence or lack of application of such skills to be wasteful. Mary creates her autobiography around the depiction of events which are conceived to hinder or promote her progress in obtaining a profession and her own lack of ability and initiative to reach this goal. Over and over, she made such remarks as "I wasted myself for many years, twenty years or so. I had never trained to do anything...and I just drifted along. I went through a long period where I didn't care for myself. I was suffering a sort of shame of not really being anything."

A factor which Mary feels contributed to her non-productive sense of self was her general liberal arts college education, which she thoroughly enjoyed but which left her unprepared professionally and with a feeling of having failed. She looks back on that period as having missed a great opportunity--to take a teacher training course and become a teacher in a small Midwestern town, thus gaining self-esteem and a profession. She said, "But I didn't want to be trained to be a teacher. I don't think I have it in me to be a good teacher. That was a sort of a stop-gap anyway. What was I going to do? That was the only thing I could do, seemingly." She felt that the lifestyle apparently required by that professional choice--living with members of the school board, teaching Sunday school and following strict behavior guidelines--was too repressive and dull for her. She explained, "By that time I had encountered Culture. I was mad about drawing. I had painter friends and musician friends. I had evenings listening to Stravinsky and Scriabin, drinking wine. We went to the museums. I couldn't even think of leaving the city; it just killed me. So I bowed out completely." In retrospect, she regrets that decision: "I didn't have the confidence to do it. I was afraid. And that was a serious error on my part and contributed to my sense of failure. I had refused a test actually." Later in our discussions, when I asked if there was anything she would do differently, given the chance to relive her life, she unhesitatingly said she would have taken that small-town teaching position.

She views the sequence of events in her middle years as reinforcing the sense of waste in her life. Instead of teaching after college, Mary took a "terribly dull" clerical job which she held for several years, until her marriage in 1930. During the early years of her marriage, she and her husband moved around the country quite a bit as he went from job to job, and their moves, coupled with the fact that those years were the height of the Depression, are the reasons she now gives for never establishing herself in a career at that time. Later on, she was raising her children, and while they were young she did not dwell too much on her "lack of skills" or "wasted time."

Her critical turning point came when she was 50; her husband left her. She says the biggest shock of that event was the realization that she would have to support herself financially and she feared "ending up scrubbing floors." After much deliberation and some encouragement from a friend, she decided to go back to school and become a librarian. She now views this choice as her biggest step toward productivity and said, "At last I had gotten up the nerve to prepare to do something." She recalls finishing her training and getting her first job as the high points in her life: "I loved the campus, I loved the study, I loved the work. It did a terrific thing for me. I felt as if I'd taken a proper direction. I really felt like something. Now, I had a function." For the first time in her life, Mary felt a sense of personal worth. She had a purpose in the world--she was working, she had a clearly defined role, and she was engaging in what she regarded as meaningful, productive activity. She claims that her self-image has steadily improved over the years since she

made the decision to become a librarian and that she has "made more friends and had more fun" than ever before. Her ability to be productive, as she defines it, has made the last twenty years of her life the best by far.

Through the use of a second theme, Mary gauges her experiences over the years by whether or not they contributed to or detracted from her self-confidence. She does this by plotting out her memories along a life span-confidence continuum: moving from no self-confidence as she rejected the small-town teaching job, to the gradual acquisition of confidence in her middle years, to her strong sense of who she is in the world now. Through this theme she explains the turnings, the patterns of adaptation, and the sequence of events in her life. For Mary, the building of confidence in her lifetime is the expression of both progress and achievement.

She describes herself during her youth and young adulthood as "terribly shy and scared." She feels she could not take the teaching job due to "lack of self-determination." She defines her lack of confidence as a "source of uneasiness until my mid-40s." When she was 45, she and her family moved to a small town where she met a couple who had a profound influence on her life. They took an active role in the development of her self-esteem by providing her much emotional support, something no one had attended to previously.

She was an only child in a household beset by constant financial difficulties and worries. She spent much time alone and remembers her father as an aloof, distant man and her mother as a preoccupied, bitter woman. Apparently, when she

was a small child, her father invested, and subsequently lost, stock that her mother had inherited. Until then, the family lived in a beautiful home and lovely neighborhood. Mary dimly recalls her mother dressed in exquisite satin dresses, playing the piano. When the money was lost, the family had to move to "the wrong side of the tracks" and her mother went to work in the local factory--a big step downward in status for them all. Mary says that her mother felt her father had ruined her life; the parents barely spoke with each other from that time onward, and there was much unresolved tension in the air. In addition, Mary's parents never paid much attention to her. She has strong memories of being dismissed from the room whenever she came in to talk with them. This was not an atmosphere in which confidence could develop easily.

During her own marriage, her husband was absorbed in his career, and Mary felt he did not provide her with much emotional support either. She says their biggest problem throughout the marriage was that they did not know how to communicate with one another; this was one of the major reasons for the divorce. Her children too, contributed to her sense of uneasiness and frustration with herself. She had never held a baby before she had her own and felt very uncomfortable taking care of her own infants. In retrospect, she feels she did not hold them enough when they were small and did not understand what they were going through when they were older. As a mother she said, "I was such a dumb creature. I didn't know anything about it. I don't know why I didn't read more in the field; I was so inept."

In a sense, the couple whom she met in mid-life were her first family. They openly loved and nurtured her and she was truly comfortable in their presence. She described what they did for her: "They were very intuitive and saw my lack of self-confidence, and they just began building me up. They showed me things, set up a reading program for me, lent me all their books, and taught me a lot. We had more fun together than I had ever had...They kept reassuring me, and telling me I was good enough..." This friendship was the first big step on her road to self-confidence.

A few years after she met this couple, she had to go to work to help support her family as her husband's career was not successful. She got a part-time job selling door-to-door which she held for several years. Its worth is measured along the confidence continuum also as she stated, "It was a good experience. I was at last working, and it gave me more confidence." Though her marriage was deteriorating and her financial situation was unstable, she felt better about her life than ever before because she was being productive. Then came her divorce and her training to become a librarian which raised her self-esteem to an even higher level.

Kluckhohn and Kluckhohn (1947), Mead (1943), Gorer (1948), Williams (1970) and other observers of American society have described productivity, progress and achievement among the characteristic American values. Clark (1967) emphasizes that these values were dominant in this society at least through the period of World War II, when Mary and the other members of this study group were growing up and in their prime. Since

values, once given shape in the individual life, are not modified easily, it is reasonable that they should remain with the individual into old age and function, along with personal experiences and historical circumstances, as the foundation on which self-conceptions are continuously built. And they do work in that way to shape Mary's themes and those of the other informants.

Of particular interest to the issue of identity dynamics is the idea that a value may provide the foundation for more than one theme in the course of a lifetime. Themes are thus the vehicle through which the meaning of a value may be reinterpreted in an individual's life as the context and understanding of that life changes. And, different themes offer alternative explanations for the role played by a particular value in a life.

Mary has created the theme, observer of life, which supplements the waste-productivity dichotomy theme as it offers a different interpretation of the meaning of productivity. She expressed this theme in a beautiful metaphor when she described what the 72 years of her life has been about:

> I just say I've been wandering through a meadow, sampling, enjoying as I went...I get so much pleasure and amusement in watching people and observing the world around me--the things that happen, the fleeting moment when something is revealed, is really quite funny, or pathetic. I mean I feel surrounded by a lot of visual and verbal dramas that are not valued for what they are by the people who are in them.

The "wandering" and "sampling" of the theme are alternatives to the "drifting" in the waste-productivity dichotomy. In that theme, drift was negative--behavior that had no purpose, no goal.

"Sampling" implies a freedom to engage in any activity one chooses, to pursue variety, to experience much. It is Mary's positive accounting of the path her life has taken. As she equates "drifing along" with waste, so she evaluates her "wanderings" as fruitful because they led her to a deeper understanding of humanity; they were also productive. The two themes co-exist in her life history.

From the biographical context of these two themes, I would venture to hypothesize that the waste-productivity dichotomy has been a method of categorizing experience for a long time. For one thing, it is a direct expression of a cultural norm during her youth and middle adulthood. Secondly, this theme is used when she talks about her self-image over the years. In contrast, her observer of life theme seems to have emerged with the knowledge of hindsight and the experience of many years. Components of this theme surfaced when I asked her to be reflective, for example, when I asked, "Has 72 years been a long time?" and "Could you tell me your philosophy of life?" She uses the observer of life theme both to explain and evaluate her lifelong behavior patterns and to integrate her perception of the "wasteful" years into her current acceptance of her lifecourse and enjoyment of the world around her.

Harold

The relationship of values to stage of life is well illustrated by the construction and integration of themes in another life history. Harold, a 76-year old retired business executive, views his entire life as a sequence of building, reaping the rewards from, and sharing economic and professional success. The experiences of his past are recalled and organized in his autobiography in order to create this theme.

Harold came from a poor family. His father owned a harness and buggy shop in a small town, and business was poor during Harold's childhood as more and more people bought automobiles. In 1920, when Harold was 18, the business collapsed. An only child, brought up in a religious atmosphere where heavy emphasis was placed on making a success in life and helping others, Harold felt a moral obligation to save his parents from financial disaster. There were few jobs available to him in the small town where he grew up and none of those paid very well, so, at the suggestion of a relative in a large city, Harold moved away from his parents in order to provide for them. He feels that was the most difficult and crucial decision in his life. He was torn; he did not want to leave them but he knew that was the only way to find a job that would enable him to support himself and send money home. That conflict set the stage for his professional motivation later. Of that time he stated: "Because of what happened to my family, I became determined never to let this happen to me. I had a strong desire to attain recognition and success, and I set out to do it."

The rest of his life history is constructed around his successes. Though he has a wife and three children who he claims are important to him, they hardly figure in his story. He defines his first success as obtaining a job with a growing manufacturing company, for through it he fulfilled his moral obligation: "My first success was getting that job, because it enabled me to send money back to the family...and I was able to do that for the rest of their lives." From this point on, his autobiography deals primarily with the progress and the adventures leading to success within the company where he worked for forty-five years.

He talked at length about his early days on the job, which are vivid in his memory:

> I started off doing things I didn't know how to do. I'll never forget that one time some executive came up, and he wanted me to take a letter. I didn't know how to tell him that I didn't take shorthand or I didn't know how to type. I decided to play the thing, maybe I could remember it. But I couldn't get any of it. And he must have known, so what was I going to do now? I told him I couldn't take shorthand, but I'd learn. And I went to night school...I used to stay there late at night, try to clean up my work, do the best I could to hold onto the job...

When I asked him to describe himself during his 20s and 30s, he replied, "I was trying hard to make a success. By this time, I was office manager and I had the responsibility of the business. So, I was always concerned about it." His self-description of the years that followed are in terms of building his career also: "In my 40s, I was concerned about whether or not I was going to make it to the top...Then I was riding on a crest, I had reached my goals." He became

a Vice President. The company asked him to stay on for several years after he thought of retiring, and he did. He was respected and needed by others for his work, and he knew that he had helped build the business. Besides the desire for professional success, there is another reason Harold was so totally immersed in his career: he worshipped his boss. From Harold's descriptions, their relationship seems to have fulfilled many roles--father/son, best friend, teacher/disciple and patron/apprentice. His boss taught him the business, gave him many opportunities for advancement, bought him a home, and involved Harold in the affairs of his lively personal life, which included making whisky in a basement during Prohibition, visiting local famous people and giving huge, rowdy parties. Harold summed up the effect of that relationship on his life: "Life with H.J. was very, very exciting. I had more exciting experiences with him at work than you can possibly believe. And this is one of the things that contributed much to my life I'm sure. The average person goes through life without the excitement, the achievements that were possible because of H.J."

Harold must continue being successful in retirement, and he has found a way to do so by "sharing" his success with others as a member of a volunteer organization which advises small businesses. He said, "We're all retired, from successful businesses. And we just have a bulk of knowledge. People with small businesses come to us and we counsel them about a problem, or an idea for expansion or if they're having difficulties with their loan payments." He views this work as

giving others the chance for a successful life. As he was motivated to achieve success throughout his life, he tries to motivate others now.

Harold claims his road to success has been via salesmanship. He worked his way to prominence in business as a salesman and now, as well as in retrospect, he sees himself as a salesman in all contexts, social as well as business. Through this theme, he structures encounters so that he is the "seller" and the other person is the "buyer." He perceives sales as a technique to control others' behavior and one's own destiny. He says "You can't force anyone to do anything, but I think you can sell a person most anything." He defines the nature of all activity in terms of sales: "We're all selling, regardless of what it is. We're selling something. And I think the closer you are to selling, the more your opportunities are, and the less your frustrations are."

In the course of our discussions, he mentioned several times that he was taught the sales technique of "obligating the merchant" in his business. He feels this technique can and should be applied to other areas of life as well in order to achieve whatever goals one has in mind. He uses this phrase to mean that in social relationships, one should create a structure of reciprocal ties: if you do someone a favor, that person must return the favor by giving you what you need to get ahead. For instance, Harold feels he can use this technique to make new friends now. He said, "The best way to get friends is to do something for them. Take them for a ride, ask them over for a drink, maybe a game of cards. You have to

obligate the merchant...If you have any sales ability at all, there's a million ways you can do it..." And later he remarked, "You can build up a circle of acquaintances who will become good friends by doing their shopping, taking them to the Senior Citizen Center, phoning them at night, helping them in different ways."

Besides sales techniques, a strong sense of individual initiative propelled Harold to success in his profession. From the time his father's business failed, Harold was determined to forge his own career. His story of how he worked his way up in his profession illustrates the weight he gives to the values of initiative and self-determination. He started at the age of 19 as an office boy, and he said of that period, "I went to night school, though I didn't have to, to learn typing and shorthand. I was determined to do well." As he looks back on the period when he acquired more responsibility, his image of himself is that of "pioneer." At various stages in his career, he personally instituted new technical innovations in the company, sometimes without organizational support. He is extremely proud of these innovations; he now feels that "pioneering a new thing" was the ultimate measure of his success.

In addition, he respects individual initiative and autonomy in other people more than any other qualities. I spent one Christmas with Harold and his family, and after the meal was finished and gifts were shared, he gathered his family and friends around him to tell "a story of Christmas--what life is all about really." With much emotion, he related the story of a man whom he met in his capacity as a volunteer small-business

consultant. The man was a jeweler and though quite competent at his craft, he was beset by problems in making a living. His store had been robbed several times, he had no knowledge of business operations, he had serious health problems, and he was extremely poor. After describing this man's personal tragedies and professional troubles in great detail, Harold said:

> S. is a perfect example of a person who comes to us for help and does what we tell him, and makes it work. He was a great jeweler but he didn't know much about business. I gave him all the information he needed to run a business. And he did it, and he's successful now. The remarkable thing is that he wouldn't accept any help or welfare or charity. He insisted on doing it all himself. I really love that man.

The story of Christmas--the embodiment of all that is good and pure in the world--is summarized here by the jeweler's incentive to pull himself up by his own bootstraps, to remain self-sufficient in the face of great difficulties. For Harold, initiative and self-determination are the most valued character traits.

The contrasting value of service emerges as pivotal in Harold's life as well, and it functions in a variety of ways. First, it is expressed directly in the theme of helping others. Second, it gives new meaning at this life stage to the themes of success, salesmanship and self-determination. Third, it provides continuity of identity.

The helping others theme became evident when Harold talked about the philosophical guiding force in his life. He conceives of a circle of goodness in the world; it is his responsibility to pass on the good life he has received to others, so that there is a balance of goodness through the world, a completion of the circle, and a sense of closure in his own life. This notion

emerged when I asked him what plans he has made for the future and how he views his retirement. He replied, "Those of us who have had a pretty wonderful life owe a little bit. If there's an opportunity to pay it back, we should...I'm very anxious to help those less fortunate so I can contribute something, pay back a little of the wonderful things that have happened to me. What could be better?" This view of his relationship to others is, of course, based upon his sense of success in his own life. His business knowledge, confidence and financial resources all make it possible for him to help others now.

The direct application of his professional knowledge in the small business consulting organization is one way he gives his success to others. But his desire to help people is not channeled only into business; Harold goes beyond that. For example, he took the jeweler who had so many health as well as business problems to his own physician and paid for the required medical treatments. He knew that in order for this man to become a success in business his health problems would have to be attended to first. And, he helps a number of frail elderly, both neighbors and old friends, with household chores and errands and with getting appropriate services from government agencies. He sees himself in the role of service provider for both business novices and the infirm elderly. He has created this role since his retirement and he currently has plans to expand his services in both areas.

In the context of Harold's perception of the past, success is defined through the professional achievements of technological inventions and increased job responsibilities. Since he is now

retired, Harold has had to change that definition in order to maintain a continuous self-image. By helping others in business and contributing to their progress, Harold extends his own success. In addition, Harold views himself as successful because through service, he is able to keep salient the theme of self-determination and the closely related value of independence. Through his consulting work, he has been able to help keep the jeweler and other people financially afloat, thus enabling them to maintain their own businesses. Also, he views his aid to his elderly friends as a way to keep them from becoming institutionalized, which indeed it might be. For example, of his behavior toward one frail neighbor he stated: "I'm trying to keep her in her apartment. I've called various people, arranged for housecleaning and hot meals to be brought in. And I take her for rides and fix things in her apartment. And she calls me in the middle of the night sometimes, when fear sets in..." As long as he can help keep this woman and other elderly people independent and can improve people's business opportunities, he can consider his behavior successful.

Harold's themes are maintained also through his need to be considered useful, which became evident when I asked him what is the most difficult thing about growing older. He answered, "Accepting the fact that the company doesn't need you anymore. Some of us have much to offer, much to contribute, and we shouldn't be set aside." He considers himself productive and active in the world still and resents his retirement as it makes the expression of those values much more difficult. In fact, he told me that the key to well-being and peace of mind

in old age was "being needed." By contributing to the welfare of both business people and frail elderly, he has created a means of continuing to feel needed and important in society. The maintenance of his salesman style of interaction accentuates his continued usefulness because by structuring relationships so that he is performing a service during the course of social interaction, others actually come to depend on him for repeated aid, or at least, he is able to define the situation so that others appear to turn to him for help.

Alice

The value of work, as goal-oriented, instrumental performance, is given form and meaning in several themes in Alice's autobiography. In her major theme, work is categorized as the search for spiritual understanding. She explains that her whole life has been oriented towards "probing," "seeking," and "finding" spiritual insight. The creation of her priorities, her principles of explanation and the organization of her life story all have been shaped by this theme.

Alice, 81, states that from the time of her young adulthood, she was motivated by "an inner craving for understanding." She observed and experimented with the practices and rituals of a variety of religions over a fifteen-year period in her quest for that understanding. She said that when she was in her mid-30s, "something clicked. There comes a time in life when you're ready." One evening she heard a non-Western religious group leader give a lecture and she was extremely impressed with his presence and ideas. A few weeks

later she joined his sect, and since then she has devoted her life to its service and to the acquisition of spiritual knowledge through its teachings and philosophy.

The drive to find something that would explain the meaning of life was instilled by her mother at an early age. Her parents were divorced when she was three, and she remembers being very sensitive to and upset by her mother's precarious financial situation which was caused by insufficient alimony payments from her father. She recalls her early childhood as "a bitter time," and as a "tremendous shock" for her mother. A few years after the divorce, her mother married a prominent physician whom they both adored. But because of his occupational commitments, he was not at home much and Alice's mother became depressed and lonely. She described her mother's behavior throughout her childhood and youth:

> She went through life seeking, seeking, seeking. We had a long hall at home; it was lined with books, and many times I'd come home from school and find her on the floor, books all around her, going through the Bible, looking, looking, looking and crying her heart out. I'd say, 'What's the matter?' And she'd say, 'I'm hunting for an answer.' And she made herself physically sick with her longing...At the end of her life, she had a very illuminating experience and the answer came, and it was quite beautiful.

This picture of her mother's needs clearly influenced her own. She said that during her youth she resented her mother's preoccupation with religion and philosophy and felt she was being neglected. It was not until her mother died that she joined the religious sect, and she could not understand her mother's need for spiritual satisfaction until she had sought and then found her own.

"Discipline" is the word Alice uses to characterize her style of behavior, her way of approaching the work in her life. She explained that her mother raised her with a "rigid discipline"--Alice looks back on a strict, restricted upbringing where discipline was imposed upon her. Her mother also taught her self-reliance and self-control from an early age and Alice noted that these were the dominant values of her peer group as well while she was growing up. As she talked about getting her first job, she stated: "That was more discipline. Six days a week. You see, from about 1915 on, those of us who were young in those days were disciplined. We just didn't skite off at the drop of a hat. We took a long time to get Saturday afternoon off..."

Later, the lifestyle required by her religious sect was "quiet and disciplined." By the time she discovered this group, discipline, in the sense of both systematic diligence toward a task and self-control, was no longer only the value of others; she had established it as her key to attaining spiritual insight. She spent years studying long hours and working toward her goals of "greater perception" and "a higher level of truth." She feels that her disciplined approach" has led her to the answers she sought about the meaning of life.

Alice approached her professional work with the same resolve as her religious strivings. She was a fashion designer, and she started her profession and built it into a thriving business motivated by a strong sense of responsibility for her own survival and success. Her emphasis on self-reliance colors all her career descriptions. For example, when she discussed

looking for a job when she finished college she said, "It wasn't a very big profession at that time and there was a minor recession. It's just awful to go from door to door and ask for work but I did it. I had to earn a living. And I came home so discouraged." After becoming employed and working several years for others, she started her own business in 1930. She never married and had to continue supporting herself and she remembers being "scared, terrified" during the Depression years. She described the first decade of her career: "I just had to put one foot in front of the other and keep going. Sometimes I thought the door would have to be closed...but suddenly, it just seemed to march along...I built up a nice clientele, repeat business a great deal. And when you get repeat business, you know you've made good."

Alice views her primary achievement not as creating a successful business, but rather as learning to cope, that is, surmounting the difficulties and overcoming the fears she faced throughout her life. Through the learning to cope theme, she defines the adaptations she has had to make over the years.

Coping with her mother's religious fervor stands out as the major hardship of her childhood. She resented the time it took away from her needs as a growing girl and she felt it ruined her family life. Her college years, though viewed as enjoyable too, are described mainly in terms of frustrations to be dealt with: "I was studying art. But the frustration was that I couldn't draw worth two cents. It just wasn't in me at all...And mathematics, it was dreadful. I suffered. I don't know how I got through those years; I just don't know

how I did it. I got out of college with a degree that seemed something, but I felt terrible frustrations."

From the time she left college until her business proved successful--about a twenty-year period--she was "scared to death" and "overcome with fear." Starting out during the Depression was the biggest hardship to surmount. Alice said she thought she might starve, but she did not know what else to do except go ahead with her plans. Bringing religion into her life shortly after she started her business greatly allayed her fears and made it possible for her to tackle her business problems as they arose and control her anxiety without succumbing to either.

Discipline and self-responsibility are the values which stand out now as the guiding force of Alice's formative years. The general economic uncertainty of the Depression and Alice's specific situation of being a single woman entering the job market during that period are the main historical factors of her early life. These factors, together with the behavioral expectations of her cultural milieu, shaped Alice's adaptive dilemmas. As representations of ideal behavior, the values contributed to her vision of life as a struggle, as a series of difficulties and fears to overcome. But also, the values are perceived as a guide to purposeful action, as the way in which both her business success and "higher truths" could be reached. The themes discussed above provide a symbolic means of interpreting the dilemmas posed by these values so that, though they are not necessarily resolved, they are accounted for and explained as Alice constructs her self-concept.

For the last five years, Alice has had her own apartment in a beautiful retirement residence complex located in an affluent neighborhood. Her attitude toward the retirement residence highlights a lifetime of anxiety created by the need to be self-reliant. She said to me, "I love it here. I have never been so free of responsibility." She views her presence in this environment as the crowning achievement in her life:

> Getting in here, where all your care is guaranteed--I'm very grateful and fortunate. It's a luxury. Everything is taken care of...I do feel that all the steps in my life have contributed toward the fact that I have this well-being and security now.

Alice has always had to take care of herself. For the first time in her life, the responsibility for her survival, and indeed for the quality of her life, is in the hands of others. She views this as a great relief, as security, and as the ultimate sign of having overcome the difficulties of her past. At this stage in life, she has gladly given up self-reliance and the fears which accompanied it for many years. She is not now striving for financial stability or religious knowledge and thus this trait, once valued as the means of reaching those goals, is no longer meaningful.

Service, another theme in Alice's life, is both the meaning given to her past activities in the religious sphere and an example of how the value of work is manifested in her life. It is not the same as Harold's helping others theme, though a moral imperative underlies both orientations. Alice has found a partial answer to the question of the meaning of life in service. For about five years after she joined the religious sect, she wondered why she had made that choice.

During those years, she was undecided about her degree of involvement in the sect and the form it should take, and her ambivalence toward her commitment caused her great inner conflict. This was alleviated when she discovered the meaning of service: "Suddenly, something happened. I felt something give in me...I could be of service, I could contribute. I'm not a meditative type, and I'm not the student type. Service was my thing." Her service took the form of the daily administration of the affairs of the sect's temple, a center for seminars, lectures, prayer groups and other activities. It enabled her to "be something a little higher," that is, to come closer to her goal of insight.

The quest for spiritual goals is no longer a major force in her life. Nevertheless, service remains an important theme. As Alice's lifestyle has changed with age--she no longer works at the temple--and as she has entered a new environment--the retirement residence--service has taken on a different meaning. This is another example of how a theme adapts to changing circumstances so that continuity of identity can be preserved. In the retirement residence, service has become a way for Alice to define the social world. She divides the other residents into two categories: Those whose lives are empty and meaningless, and those who serve others and have contributed something to this world. She places most of the 300 people who share her surroundings in the first category and said of them, "They run around, trying to keep busy, filling their time with activities. What are they all rushing for? It's because they have nothing else." She places herself and her few friends

in the second category, for she can only feel compatible with people who also hold this value and can present evidence of it in their life's work.

For example, she described her two closest friends there in the following terms: One worked hard at her profession as a college teacher in addition to having full financial responsibility for a number of sick relatives. The other has had a strong religious orientation throughout life and Alice said of her, "She is disciplined in her point of view. And she is consistent in her daily effort to reach spiritual things and to work, work, work, in trying to gain an inner insight that she longs for." Clearly, friends now are those who have held her determined, no-nonsense attitude toward life and who currently share her disdain for the "mad-house social life" that she feels most other people in this setting maintain. For Alice, people are categorized and judged by the values they share with her--especially service, work and responsibility.

Discussion

In his essay, "Reflections on the American Identity," Erikson (1963:285-325) conceives of polarities in values as the foundation of American individual ego identity. He discusses values in terms of the opposite elements contained within them, for example, migratory/sedentary, individualistic/standardized, competitive/cooperative, to illustrate the range of behavioral choices perceived by members of this society and the contradictions and tensions inherent in those choices.

The values expressed in the life histories of my informants represent polarities as well. We have seen competition/communion emphasized in the stories of Millie and Ben, generosity/individualism especially strong in the lives of Ben, Stella and Harold, productivity/waste for Stella and Mary, and self-determination/dependence stressed in the accounts of Millie, Mary and Alice. In this chapter, I have tried to show how themes provide a symbolic means for the explanation and integration of value polarities and the contradictions they contain.

We saw that Mary reconciled years of waste through the observer of life theme, in which she expanded her definition of productivity. By charitable acts, Harold is able to serve others while keeping his autonomous success image intact. And by giving time and much energy to a religious order, Alice was able to make critical personal achievements.

Accounting for value polarities occurs in the themes constructed by Millie, Ben and Stella as well. Millie has asserted herself as a "helper" in the nursing home. She

willingly assists those more infirm than she in getting around the home and in meeting their daily needs whenever she can. She is aware of the fact that though she has health problems, many others around her are more disabled and she attends to them with genuine concern. We have seen that her behavior, though sincere, is filled with expectations of respect, love and devotion from those she helps, and perhaps more importantly, from those who observe her helping--the residents, staff and volunteers in the institution. Compassion is a value she holds, but as with any other value, she does not simply act with compassion outside a behavioral context. Millie incorporates it into her thematic repertoire: she competes to be of service. She interprets this behavior as the way to acquire more love and affection and enhance her status.

To be selfless or selfish is Stella's ongoing dilemma. She always chooses to do for others, but this choice creates frustration as it gives her little remaining time for her personal work. The dilemma cannot be resolved because in Stella's life, doing for others is a responsibility; it means serving the needs of artists by running the studio. This is the commitment she has made. And though it produces conflict in her, she receives much gratification knowing that through her efforts in the studio, good art is being created by the other artists.

The value of service is a source of conflict for Ben also. We have seen that he views service, expressed as

generosity, as a religious ideal, and as such it incorporates both charity and compassion. But in this definition lies the dilemma for Ben: to give compassion, in the form of time and emotional energy to those less fortunate than himself, and to give away money would entail alteration of the themes he has created and around which he has constructed his identity. The need for financial security has motivated much of his behavior and functioned as an explanatory principle through most of his life. His style of social and emotional detachment has been cultivated over a lifetime and has probably contributed to his optimistic outlook in the face of much personal hardship. In order to give away money, he would have to abandon his self-image, a person facing financial hardship. To commit time and energy to a worthy cause, he must give up his style of social and emotional detachment. Though service is important to him, the conflict of knowing he cannot reach his religious ideal remains because Ben does not relinquish these themes.

In this chapter, I have tried to show how values are defined, made personally relevant and interpreted in the life history to account for changing circumstances and perceptions that occur as one grows older. What can be said, now, about the relationship between values and continuity of identity? Clark (1967, 1972) and Clark and Anderson (1967) have shown that in American society there is a marked cultural discontinuity for old people that is based on value-orientations. Their research findings stress the fact that the modal values for young and middle-aged Americans--including achievement, progress, independence

and others discussed in this chapter--are maladaptive for elderly people in our society for whom there are different norms and expectations. Those old people who adapt best to their social milieux are those who have maintained a more varied or flexible value-orientation throughout their lives or who are able to shift to another set of values late in life.

The thematic examples from the life histories of Mary, Harold and Alice illustrate my contrasting findings: through the creation of themes, old people are able to reinterpret and reevaluate their lifelong values in the context of changing surroundings and social interaction patterns in order to attain a familiar sense of self and prevent discontinuity. I have tried to show that the construction of themes provides individuals with a means of privately and idiosyncratically reformulating cultural goals and norms to "fit" their current perceptions of their pasts and the nature of their relationships with others. In this way, a person continues to perceive him or herself as an integral member of a cultural group and view his or her own life as whole and meaningful.

This discussion has attempted to illustrate how cultural values--as an underlying criterion by which themes are constructed--are implicated in the construction and maintenance of identity in old age. The concept of value, viewed in this way, integrates the individual life themes with a shared cultural context. What does this analysis offer to life history studies in anthropology? Other writers have noted that the life history has been considered primarily a supportive and illustrative device in the construction of cultural profiles

and description of social norms. Their use has been limited in anthropological research because of their perceived lack of generalizability and representativeness. Yet, anthropologists have always collected them because they are compelling expressions of culture, providing vivid and diverse details from a wide spectrum of social life. The analysis of life histories by theme, and by the shared ideational criteria on which themes are based, provides the researcher with a method of comparing cases and generalizing both within a social group and across cultural boundaries.

5. THEMES AND GROWING OLD

> The old are unsure of a future, their past has grown stale so they are dependent on the sentience of the moment. It behooves us to be sentient.
> Or--the old live by recalling the past, and are fascinated by the query of what future is possible. Their present is empty.
> Or--there is nothing of interest to be said about the old, except that they are absorbed by age.
> Each could be true. One takes one's choice.
>
> ----Florida Scott-Maxwell
> at age 82

Creating Continuity

The construction of a coherent, unified sense of self is an ongoing process. In the preceding chapters, I have tried to show that people maintain a self-concept through the creation of themes. Themes symbolically unify the experiences of a lifetime by emphasizing what has been important in the past, defining relationships among separate elements in a life history, and incorporating the meaning of memorable past experiences and cultural values into present situations.

The experiences which themes integrate are continually reinterpreted in light of new circumstances. A person selects events from his or her past to structure and restructure his or her self-concept. Thus, themes continue to evolve from and give form to personal experience--making identity a cumulative process. At whatever point in time an individual constructs his or her life story, he or she picks and chooses from a storehouse of memories and

reflections. Reconstruction of the past and interpretation of one's self change as one grows older and has more experiences from which to choose and greater distance from which to evaluate past events. This is one reason themes "fit" together so well in a life story. Those which have no explanatory or symbolic value at the time the story is told are weeded out and discarded. Continuous restructuring allows one to maintain a feeling of unity about oneself and a sense of connection with the parts of one's past considered relevant to who one is at present.

Personal identity as a phenomenon can be studied only in the present; the researcher cannot know about those themes which have been altered or abandoned because the interpretation of experience takes place only through presently existing frameworks of understanding. The analyst cannot separate the past from the present in an oral life history; one can know the meaning of the past only through a person's current interpretation of it.[1] Because of this, the informant's identity (or major aspects of it) is shaped anew in the process of telling the story of his or her life.

Identity viewed as both cumulative process and current phenomenon may provide us with a way of understanding adult development over time and in a social context. Most theories of adult development implicitly assume that the individual life course follows a curve or trajectory--rising, arriving at a height of something (i.e., occupational success, social status, standard of living, positive self-image, etc.) and then falling back (Mandelbaum 1973). The concept of self often has been viewed from this paradigm with the aging individual seen as

struggling to maintain a positive self-image--or succumbing to mental disorder or discontentment--in the face of declining health, status, economic clout, social network, power and mobility. The focus on themes in the lives of the elderly allows us to conceive of aging as ongoing participation in the creation of cultural forms through the interpretation of values and historical, geographical and social circumstances in which the individual finds him or herself.

The self-concept is created and recreated over time as a person progresses through the life span. Through themes, the self-concept is established and built up to have structure and meaning as experience is layered on experience and is simultaneously reflected upon, evaluated, adjusted to and incorporated. But rather than being constructed to follow the rise and fall of an external trajectory through time, the self-concept is built around themes, without regard to time, as past experiences are symbolically connected with one another to have meaning for a particular individual.

One of my findings is that elderly individuals do not define themselves primarily as old. Millie, Ben, Stella, and the other members of the study group know they are old. They do not deny the fact. But they think of and describe themselves in terms of the themes they have established over a lifetime. None of them has, at a certain juncture, created a new constellation of themes to coincide with the developmental stage of life called "old age." The themes which have evolved throughout the lives of these people are the themes through which they understand themselves and discuss their circumstances at present.

Their conversations about their respective aging processes and the situations they must face as they grow older were framed in the thematic material they presented.

Continuity of themes is thus a key element in the identity of this elderly population and, I suspect, in the elderly in general. What can we say about the meaning of continuity in the individual life? Myerhoff notes that continuity in a life does not arise spontaneously, that it must be achieved (1979:222). The individual actively seeks continuity as he or she goes through ordinary daily existence and interprets the circumstances with which he or she deals. In the following pages, I will present case material to illustrate how people attain continuity through maintenance of the themes they have created and to demonstrate how existing themes are applied, adapted, and/or reformulated to new contexts so that a familiar and continuous sense of self emerges.

In this chapter I will focus on the topic of growing old in the lives of Millie, Ben and Stella. I must stress that all the people I interviewed did not spontaneously volunteer information about "being" old. Instead, they responded to the subject when I asked specific questions about it. In this chapter I want to emphasize 1) the issues of primary importance to these three individuals that relate to old age, and 2) how these issues interface with the themes in their lives.

Millie

Millie speaks of starting a "new life" when she moved into the Home, and she sees herself "improving" and "learning" continually. She perceives her own aging as a process of renewal that began when she arrived at the institution.

I asked her to look in the mirror and describe her image. She said, "I go by what people tell me. They say I look a hundred percent better than I did. I have changed considerably from what I looked like when I first came in here, and I see a more pleasant expression in my face, and I'm more inspired about my routine..." Here, Millie's reference point for her self-description is other people's remarks about her improved morale and appearance. In another interview, I asked her to describe herself. She replied, "I love people. I love the way they feel about me here, the attention." She thinks of herself only in terms of affiliation. We know that her relationships with people comprise her major category of experience. Her current self-image is in keeping with this theme that has woven through her life history. As she views others in terms of their ties to her, so she sees herself as a product of social interaction. Continuous improvement and loving others are her specific self-descriptions at age 80. "Being" old--a state unrelated to other people--does not enter into her conceptual framework at all.

She lives in a long-term care facility because, since she had a stroke, she can no longer provide for all her own needs. She cannot use her hands too well and must ask for help when cutting food. She needs help getting dressed and undressed as

well. She attaches no value to these limitations and asks for aid easily whenever she cannot manage some task. Her autonomy is not threatened by seeking or receiving help; her ego is not bruised. She does not associate the need for assistance with an aged self-image in particular or with old age in general.

When she explains why she came to the Home, her reason is not that she was too disabled to live alone any longer. Rather, she states, "Before I came here I was so lonely, I was afraid of going out of my mind. I'm not the type to sit around and watch TV and read magazines. That's why I came here. I like to mingle, to be around people, to have a roommate, to have company. It's what my disposition needs." Again, the need for social connections is the dominant force in Millie's life and she perceives it as the reason she came to the Home. Her family and physician would find the cause of her institutionalization elsewhere.

She only refers to her physical condition when she feels she is being mistreated by others. In these instances, she uses her infirmities to manipulate interaction. Her body image is a stylistic device that she employs to satisfy her needs and maintain other themes. For example, one morning she was quite distressed and complained to me that a nurse had offended her. She said, "I can't take it--in my condition. I'm a patient here. I don't have the strength to take that abuse." When someone does not treat her as she would like, she perceives herself as weak and ill, and then uses that self-image as the reason she should not be abused. I never heard her refer to herself as a "patient" before or after this incident. This

self-perception is clearly a survival tactic and it is only called into play when needed to gain respect or take control of a situation.

Another component in the formation of Millie's self-concept is her perception of her present relationship with her children. She says that she is happy living in the Home mainly because it pleases her children that she is there; she takes her cue for her own emotional state from them. For instance, she once stated to me, "When I tell my children of my accomplishments in classes, they say, 'Wonderful Mother. I'm so glad to hear it.'...I'm so happy that they are thrilled because I'm here." She discusses her activities with them regularly by telephone and when they come to visit her, and their reinforcement of her behavior is crucial to the maintenance of her self-esteem and emotional well-being. She looks to her children for both feedback and encouragement for continuing with her specific pursuits in the Home and justification for living there at all. On several occasions, when she was depressed or angered by some incident in the Home, she would break down, crying, and say, "If I didn't have my children to pull me through, I don't know what I'd do. They're everything to me." They provide her with a means of keeping up her morale and finding contentment in her present situation through an unspoken contract between them which reads: If my children are happy that I'm in the Home, then I must be happy about it too.

Yet, honoring the contract is not easy, for according to Millie, the relationship is far from satisfactory. Two children live in the same city as she does; they do not visit

her enough. The other two live in another part of the country; they do not communicate often enough by letter or telephone. Millie gets quite distraught if more than a week goes by without a visit and worries about her children's health, jobs, marriages and children. Her peace of mind is forever being threatened by the perceived lack of attentiveness on their part, and though she is surrounded by others who are sociable, she is lonely without constant communication from her children.

In Chapter Three, I mentioned that in Millie's thematic scheme, family members are devoted, attentive and always available; the worth of all relationships is measured by these qualities. In reality, the children do not always manifest all these qualities. Though upset that her children do not meet her standards, Millie does not alter the theme to conform to their actual behavior or discard the theme outright. For it is the theme, not the children, which keeps Millie from falling apart emotionally. Through it, she is able to view her children as her primary and constant source of affection. This is her reason for living.

The theme also provides continuity. In order for Millie to continue perceiving herself as a loving and lovable person, her love for her children cannot falter, for they are the only stable outlet for her own love. Friends and acquaintances in the Home die or move away to hospitals. Staff members and volunteers come and go. But the relationship with children is permanent, whether or not they are visible. She can show her love for them in two ways--by honoring the unspoken contract, and by conceiving of her children in the ideal thematic framework she has constructed rather than focusing on their actual shortcomings.

Ben

I asked Ben if he felt like 74. He said, "No, I don't, I feel the same as I did when I was much younger...And as a matter of fact, I have a strong desire since my wife died to relive my coed days." When he looks back on his life, the years he spent in college stand out as the closest he was able to come to his "carefree," "romantic" self. His arrival in the college town in his early twenties symbolizes both his break away from the small town where he was raised and forced into a religious mold that he did not fit, and his first exposure to "big city" life and freedom. He recalled those days: "What a thrill it was to be there, and see four street car tracks, and all the excitement. I got a little Chevy coupe, and I started to date girls. And I enjoyed life as a single person."

He yearns to become what he remembers about that self now. When I asked what he was going to do about it, he replied, "I'm not doing anything about it because you have to be your age, you know...I could easily get going with a younger person. But I realize that would be unfair to the younger person and make a fool out of myself." The two conceptions of self which Ben has struggled with through most of his life now structure his perception of being old, and the discrepancy between them creates a sense of frustration and futility.

On the one hand, Ben does not identify with his chronological age. He is healthy and has no physical ailments. He feels like a college student and he wants to act that way. On the other hand, he knows that to be 74 and to act 21 is socially inappropriate. With such a strong sense of propriety, he cannot

ignore a lifetime of moral values and transcend the cultural assumptions of age-graded behavior. His worry about what other people and his "sober," "responsible" side would think prohibit him from becoming involved with a young woman.

The maintenance into old age of the theme of discrepant selves is evident also in his comments about sex. He noted, "When I hear these jokes and stories about sex at 70, it almost revolts me. But then I realize I'm 74. I still have sex on my mind." He accepts the cultural stereotype that sex and old age are incompatible and indeed repulsive. But he also knows that the stereotype does not fit his own identity. The conflict of "feeling" one age and "being" another age is unresolved.

I asked Ben if he had any expectations, while he was growing up, of what being old would be like. He answered, "Ever since I was a youngster, I have thought of old people as infirm and sick. It was not a cheerful picture. Debilitation, fear of poverty, dependency. It wasn't a nice thing to look forward to." His fears of catastrophic illness and destitution, formed by his image of his father and his early family life, have largely shaped his conception of the aging process.

But this picture is not completely negative. We recall that the theme of religion organizes Ben's discussion of his past and sets his priorities for the future. It is also his framework for imagining what the future will be like, and as such, it is the only positive component in his conception of aging. I asked him what he was going to do for the next twenty years. He replied:

> The older I get, and the less I'm able to do for people and the less use I'll be to them, I'll be narrowed down to the time when I will be alone and helpless except for whatever visitors choose to come, which I know won't be very many. So, if I didn't have that final resource, life would look very bleak to me...I don't see how people can get along, why they aren't driven to great sadness by the fact that people are going to desert them...I would call on my religious aids, on the parish priest, and I would expect him to reinforce my hopes about the next life.

Religion injects the only optimism into his view of aging and dying as it provides him with an explanation of both the purpose of life on earth and life after death.

Ben's assumptions about what aging and dying will be like reflect other themes in his identity as well. First, he supposes he will not be able "to do" for others. We have discussed the issue of generosity, a major preoccupation in his life. Ben fears that as he grows older, he will become infirm and will not be able to be of service, to be useful, and thus will end his life falling short of his ideal. Second, social isolation has been a key theme in his past and he views this theme continuing until death. And now, in the context of the subject of aging, he explains his isolation as an outcome of his inability to help others. Third, he views "desertion" as a fact of aging. We know that Ben has no meaningful social relationships to give him a connection to the world of people. His feelings of ultimate abandonment stem from his lifelong experience of lack of permanence and ultimate value in human relationships. These themes that emerged as Ben told me about himself are the ones that define for him the nature of social

interaction in old age. They continue to work for Ben, and though ultimately pessimistic, they provide an explanation of old age and a connection with his sense of himself at other points in his life span.

Stella

I asked Stella how she felt about growing older. She replied:

> Age doesn't mean anything to me. I don't ever feel like I'm getting any older. I usually feel like I'm going to live forever. If I don't go around falling and having accidents, I might... I never feel old until something happens. When I had my automobile accident, it took me a long time to get over it. That to me is old--when you begin to feel weak and shaking, and you can't do what you had been doing. I didn't think I was ever going to be well again, and I was going to be that way the rest of my life. 'Til you gradually get well and get back to work and you feel like yourself again--you're never going to be old.

Stella clearly does not think of herself as old except when she cannot "do." We recall that one of the themes in her life is the need to do and create. Only when access to the fulfillment of this theme is restricted by an infirmity is she made aware of her advanced age. Old to her means the limitation of activity and productivity. She views herself as ageless and potentially immortal. Only clumsiness on her part--"falling and having accidents"--can make her succumb to mortality.

Her ageless conception of self is derived from both the themes she has established throughout her life and her interpretation of her present environment. We have seen that the people in her social world are at least a generation younger that she. Over a period of several months, I observed her

interactions with the young people who work in the studio and found that they do not act toward her as if she were old; they do not assume her activity should be restricted or that she should be treated in a certain way because she is 82. Rather, they perceive her energy level and physical and mental capacities to be equal to theirs and in fact, they are. Their behavior toward her reinforces her own view of self as ageless. She once said to me, "Somebody made the remark to me--'You don't even talk like you're old; you talk like you're the same age as whoever you're talking to.' I said 'That's the way I am.' I feel like I'm the same age they are when I'm talking to them."

Her feeling of agelessness and sense of immortality extend to her artist's studio. She has poured herself into it and she does not want it to stop functioning when she dies. This is a major concern for her and she spoke about it many times in our conversations. The studio is synonymous with life; she does not wish to see that life end. "My house and studio here--anybody I'd leave it to would sell it, just as soon as I die. But I don't want it to be that way. I don't want this place to be sold. I would rather I could make a permanent workshop out of it somehow." She discussed with me at length possible alternatives for keeping the studio a viable place after her death. Her concern for a permanent studio is not shared by others and she knows this. She talked about this problem in terms of the selfish/selfless theme described earlier: "These kids, they only think of themselves. I suppose they think the studio will continue forever. They don't plan ahead at all." Just as she feels the daily upkeep of the studio rests ultimately

on her, so she perceives its existence after her death as her sole responsibility.

Stella's desire for a permanent studio is an expression of the need for continuity of themes in her life. The concept of perpetuity symbolizes both maintenance of themes throughout her life span and connection of themes with future generations. For example, her preoccupation with a permanent studio emphasizes both her selfless, giving approach to life and her productivity. These themes are so vital that Stella envisions giving to others and creating art after she is gone. The preservation of the studio would immortalize these aspects of her identity. Second, Stella needs her personal efforts to be carried on by others just as she carried on her mother's productivity and daughter's art. Since she has no living descendents to establish her biological continuity with the future, she needs "these kids" to act as her family, preserving what is important to her. In this way, they would symbolize a familial link with succeeding generations. Third, the studio is her most important creation. Stella wants it, as a tangible object, to have an impact on the future as a work of art can. As the visible and symbolic edifice of her creative process, it could immortalize her identity as an artist. More than any other person discussed in this dissertation, Stella illustrates the desire for continuity <u>past</u> her life span. She looks beyond her own life as she seeks thematic continuity.[2]

The Ageless Self and Social Gerontology

To reiterate the main point of the preceding discussion, during the year I spent doing fieldwork, my informants made it clear to me that "aging" per se is not a substantive issue in their own lives. They do not, now that they are over 70, conceive of themselves in a context of "aging" and act accordingly. Rather, they deal with specific problems, changes and disabilities as they arise, just as they have been doing throughout their lives, and they interpret these changes, problems, etc. in the light of already established themes. The concept of aging is too abstract, too impersonal to be an integral part of identity. This is not to say that my informants ignore or deny their own aging and the discomforts and limitations which arise in that process. They do not. But the point I wish to make is that the physical and mental manifestations of old age are not central to their self-perceptions. I heard many statements which illustrate this. For example, a 92-year old woman told me:

> I always think of myself as younger, though not at any specific age, just at some time in the past. Whenever I'm walking downtown, and I see my reflection in a store window, I'm shocked by how old it is. I never think of myself that way.

And a woman who is 70 remarked:

> I just saw some slides of myself and was quite taken aback. That couldn't be me. That's a nice looking woman, but it couldn't possibly be me. Even though I look in the mirror all the time, I don't see myself old.

What is the meaning of this sense of timelessness for the field of gerontology? There are two basic concepts in social gerontology which have channeled most research and attributed certain characteristics to the nature of the aging process:

adaptation and life span development. Each is discussed below.

Maddox and Wiley state:

> The relationship between aging and successful adaptation (variously morale or life satisfaction or mental health) is perhaps the oldest, most persistently investigated issue in the social scientific study of aging (1976:15).

Adaptation has at least two meanings which have shaped nearly forty years of research. One is contentment. Simić has noted that research aimed at discovering and evaluating levels of contentment, problematic in itself, reflects an American ethnocentrism which supposes that "happiness" is what one strives for in old age (1978:16). A basic premise of this view is that any state of being other than "happiness" is detrimental to the individual and is to be avoided if at all possible. Besides the empirical and methodological problems this view entails, the definition itself traps the investigator into looking at questions that deal with the presence, absence and quantity of contentment in later life--a narrow scope for aging research.

A second meaning of adaptation in gerontology is derived from the study of evolution; in this context it means altering some personal behavior patterns to ensure survival in a social world ruled by younger people. This meaning underlies disengagement theory for example: one can age "successfully" if one relinquishes social roles when one gets old.

Life span development is a concept with primarily methodological consequences. Its essential premise is that <u>age</u> is a variable which can be studied and manipulated in relation to other variables--for instance, demographic factors, roles, community formation, and social structure--for the purpose of

predicting behavior. Studies employing this concept stress how the aging process or a specific chronological age affect other variables and are in turn affected by them. The assumption is that age per se is the factor to which other things should be compared in order to derive behavior patterns.

In research based upon these concepts, individual members of the population being studied are largely interchangable; details of the individual life are of no consequence. But if one investigates the individual life course and how meaning is obtained from it, the concepts of adaptation and life span development can be broadened.

I have tried to show that through the construction of themes, the individual adapts to his surroundings by symbolically connecting past experiences with current circumstances. Adaptation in later life may be conceived as more than striving for contentment; it is also the way in which a person continues to categorize experience, organize the past, explain the sequence of events and communicate with others. Adaptation viewed in these terms allows research in gerontology to address the operating frameworks of the elderly themselves. The thematic analysis of life history material reveals the phenomenological understanding of self as ageless to show us that chronological age alone is not a key factor in the determination of behavior. Instead, construction and interpretation of experience as one grows older is found to be a critical element that gives form and meaning to one's actions.

6. CONCLUSION: CONTINUITY IN CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The creation of a sense of continuity is both a vehicle for positive self-esteem in American old people and an important developmental task. Is continuity of identity unique to Western culture, or is it a universal phenomenon? If it is not universal, are old people in other societies deprived of discovering personal unity and making symbolic connections at the end of their lives? A wide range of ethnographic literature illustrates the fact that people make sense out of and account for their lives at any age--not only when they are old (c.f.: Braroe 1975; Erikson 1963; Freeman 1979; Lewis 1961; Watson 1976); the establishment of continuity is probably a universal phenomenon. However, I would like to suggest that the way continuity is achieved and the symbols with which it is constructed vary from culture to culture because 1) the dimensions or attributes which define and distinguish individual identity vary among cultural groups (c.f.: Lee 1959), and 2) the social contexts, institutions, and structural frameworks within which people form their beliefs, values, goals and expectations also vary. The cross-cultural literature on aging rarely addresses the topics of identity or continuity; nevertheless, it does provide us with a body of data so that we may begin to understand how continuity is achieved in other societies.

Every society contains its own set of mechanisms whereby its members can attain a sense of continuity in their lives. In age-graded societies, such as among some African and Australian peoples, a new role and social identity is supplied abruptly as the individual enters each successive age grade. Though these peoples are faced with role discontinuity as they pass through the life cycle, continuity entails more than social role, and there are cultural means available to them for promoting a sense of interconnectedness through time and with their fellowmen. Turner (1967) has pointed out that identity may be defined not only as role or social status, but also as a process of becoming. Age-graded societies provide their members with a vehicle for promoting continuity of identity, viewed in this way, through ritual, especially rites of passage. Though roles change, the process of taking on new roles and entering new relationships is continuous and lifelong, and it is built into the structure of social life through ritual. Because of this, individuals in age-graded societies establish both a profound identification with age-mates, thus achieving continuity across individual boundaries, and a sense of unity with ancestors and descendants to create continuity beyond the boundaries of one life span.[1]

In other types of societies, shifts in role in old age, and thus role discontinuity, are present, though they may appear more gradually and be less clearly defined than in age-graded societies. For example, in some traditional societies, older men cease farming or hunting to become religious, political or judicial leaders. In many parts of the world, both

men and women gradually cease physical labor as they become old to take on supervisorial or ritual functions (Cowgill and Holmes 1972). In nonindustrial societies, continuity may be maintained by a variety of means. First, it may be achieved ritually, as it is in age-graded societies. Second, it may be maintained spatially by those people who spend their entire lives in one village and whose ancestors and descendants are connected with the same place. Third, continuity can be created by interpersonal means. In cultures where most interactions are face-to-face and old people are surrounded by kin and neighbors they have known for many years, role discontinuity is tempered by lifelong personal association. For instance, a man may no longer be a farmer, yet he can still be known and respected as an honorable person throughout his community. Therefore, though roles and the status which accompanies them may change as people become old in simpler societies, cultural continuity is built into those social systems in a variety of ways to provide the basis for a familiar and integrated identity in old age.

American society provides its members with few means, structural or symbolic, for attaining continuity. For example, in our primarily urban industrial setting, only a small percentage of the population can claim any feeling of connection with the land itself. And, with such high value placed on personal freedom and mobility, few people have a lifelong relationship with a particular place. Second, our culture promotes an ahistorical, disjointed world view. There are no

myths, few if any heroes, no sacred places, events or times to connect individuals with a larger universe and purpose and sense of truth.

Because the culture does not contain many frameworks which nurture spatial, temporal or ideational continuity, individuals must achieve it on their own. The construction and maintenance of themes is one way for individuals in American society to create symbolic connections throughout their lives among places, events, people, the past and the future.

This dissertation has shown how continuity is maintained by an urban, mobile group of older Americans through the interpretation of cultural materials in the ongoing process of identity formation. I have discussed five principles as the building blocks of identity: 1) the need to account for, make sense of, and impart logic and naturalness to one's entire life experience; 2) the limitations and opportunities faced at different life stages due to social and historical factors; 3) cultural values and their meaning to the individual; 4) the need for symbolic connections maintained across the life span; and 5) the interpretation of present circumstances which include physical environment, social interaction patterns, and the impact of concepts of past experiences on them.

The thematic analysis of life histories of members of this study group shows us that identity continues to evolve in old age. The way it is defined by these informants at present is determined by the combination of these five principles--the way they are symbolically linked and the degree to which each is emphasized. As these are ever-changing, identity is always a dynamic process and provides, at any age, much substance for study.

NOTES

Chapter One

1. Erik Erikson's ego psychology reveals private meaning systems also, but in a psychoanalytic, not cultural, perspective (eg: 1958, 1963, 1969).

2. Morris Opler uses the word "theme" in his discussion of world view and values: "A postulate or position, declared or implied, and usually controlling behavior or stimulating activity which is tacitly approved or openly promoted in a society..." (1945:198). I am using the word differently here.

3. The concept of "accountable" is taken from Harold Garfinkle, Studies in Ethnomethodology. He uses the term to mean that people are "accountable" all the time, in the process of everyday living: "...accounts of everyday activities are used as prescriptions with which to locate, to identify, to analyze, to classify, to make recognizable, or to find one's way around in comparable occasions..." (1967:2). I use the term in a more restricted sense; people looking back on their lives are also making sense out of them.

Chapter Three

1. This approach is taken from Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 1973, esp. pp. 448-449.

2. Pseudonyms are used throughout this dissertation to preserve anonymity.

3. Eric Pfeiffer, "A Short Portable Mental Status Questionnaire for the Assessment of Organic Brain Deficits in Elderly Patients," 1975. This mental status questionnaire is a standard for assessing "deficiencies" in the elderly. It contains the questions: "What is the date today?," and "What day is it?"

4. Many other writers have documented the poverty and struggle of new immigrants to New York at the turn of the century, for example, Handlin 1951; Howe 1976.

5. A number of longitudinal studies analyze the role played in later life by ego strength acquired much earlier in the life span. Cf: Block 1971; Haan and Day 1974; Lowenthal et al 1975; Maas and Kuypers 1975; Peskin 1972.

6. Great Books of the Western World. Hutchins, Robert Maynard, Editor in Chief. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 54 volumes, 1952.

7. This idea is fully elaborated in Niels Braroe's book, Indian and White, 1975.

Chapter Four

1. I am grateful to Christie Kiefer for his help in clarifying the distinction between "themes" and "values" set forth here. He offered many suggestions which I have incorporated in this chapter.

Chapter Five

1. Psychoanalytic technique does aim to separate the meaning of the past from that of the present. However, free association, rather than oral life history, is the vehicle used to accomplish that goal.

2. Barbara Myerhoff describes a similar situation in the case of Jacob Koved, 1979:195-231.

Chapter Six

1. The notion of these forms of continuity is taken from Barbara Myerhoff, Number Our Days, 1979, esp. pp. 108 and 221.

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