“Every Memory has a Meaningful Story to Tell”

Interview with an Older Person: Integrating Theory

University of Aruba

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Introduction

Aging is a natural part of the human life cycle. As we age, we learn new things about ourselves, how our bodies change due to biological, physiological, and psychological changes that affect how we see ourselves and our ability to live and age productively and successfully. According to Hooyman and Kiyak (2011) aging is defined as “changes that occur to an organism during its life span, from development to maturation to senescence (p.38).”

In order to age successfully and productively, we must consider the necessary lifestyle changes starting from a young age. This could be a change in our diet, everyday activities, reduce our consumption of unhealthy foods, cigarettes and alcohol or simply how we choose to see others and ourselves.

For the final semester assessment of the course Gerontological Social Work, I had the privilege and opportunity to interview a close friend and mentor who I admire how she continues to age successfully and productively Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen Throughout the course of her lifetime, she dedicated a lot of time and effort in living a meaningful and fulfilled life as healthy and happy as possible. In addition I had the privilege of interviewing a fellow Kiwanis member who I consider to be actively and healthy aging Mr. Ferguson.

The field of Gerontology is of significant importance for me as a future Social Worker because it provides me with the opportunity to assess, understand, treat, intervene and contribute to the aging population within a developmental perspective preparing and making a care plan in efforts of promoting healthy and successful aging” In this paper I will elaborate on the concepts of the aging process, productive aging, healthy aging, the right of the older person and recommendations, which includes a care plan for my interviewees.
The Aging Process

The aging process is often viewed as something that occurs only when we reach a certain age, for example at the age of 65. However, from the moment we are born until the day that we continue to age everyday. According to Hooyman and Kiyak (2011) the aging process consists of four components, each of which interacts with one another: chronological aging, biological aging, psychological aging, and social aging.

Chronological Aging

Chronological aging is understood as “aging based on a person’s years lived from birth” (p.4, Hooyman and Kiyak, 2011). Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen’s chronological age is 67 and Mr. Ferguson’s chronological age is 73. “The undersigned age 73 was born in Aruba of British West Indian parents (N. Ferguson, personal communication, may 24, 2018).” The chronological age of a person is widely used as who is considered an older person. According to the gerontological theory an older person is a person who is over the age of 60 years old. When reflecting on the chronological age of both interviewees I was able to identify that both Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen and Mr. Ferguson have a sense of pride in their chronological age.

Biological Aging

In contrast to chronological aging, biological aging according is referred to as “physical changes that occur in the aging process”. The biological changes in aging have both visible and invisible changes. The visible changes are the changes we are able to see for example: changes in motor functions, becoming more slow when walking or talking, changes in sensory such as vision, taste, smell, and touch. Additional physical changes include hair loss, fragility, change in
skin and bones and loss of teeth. The invisible changes are for example changes in the reproductive system or changes in the sensory system.

Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen shared that one of the first biological changes of aging she noticed was when she began to experience physical inability and slowing of her motor functions. However she does not let this keep her from maintaining a physically active life by attending her Tai Chi classes twice a week.

Mr. Ferguson also mentioned that he began experiencing biological changes at the age of 52 when his hair color began to change and his eyesight began to worsen. Not only the changes in his appearance but also his loss of energy and motors skills began to slow down. “Time waits on no one and you can’t turn the clock back. As the color of your changes you realize that you are aging and your children are growing too fast. Christmas comes and goes too quickly. We are no longer too energetic. When your kids graduate, get married and move out you realize that you are aging (N. Ferguson, personal communication, May 24, 2018).”

Although both Mr. Ferguson and Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen indicated that neither have a chronic disease or illness they do experience these in their family, which also made them more health conscious. As Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen shared “we do have Diabetics, cholesterol hypertension and cancer in the family”. Illnesses and diseases present in one’s family history has an impact on the life expectancy especially if this is hereditary. I was able to identify the wear and tear theory because as both participants mentioned the body loses some of its natural functions or does not function as optimally as it did a few years back. “With advanced age the body loses its ability to repair damage caused by stressors” (Hooyman and Kiyak, 2011).
Furthermore the immunological theory could also be applied considering that as a person ages their immune system begins to weaken and declines as well. This natural process could be less severe through changes in a healthy diet and physically active lifestyle. Both participants indicated that after the age of 50 they began to take multivitamins and nutritional supplements as their bodies began to change.

**Psychological Aging**

Both interviewees indicated that they do not experience or have experienced excessive psychological changes such as loss of cognition and memory abilities. According Hooyman and Kiyak (2011) when a person does not feel or have any of these psychological changes “the person is considered psychologically young”; thus both Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen and Mr. Ferguson are psychologically young. Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen indicated that she believes this is due to her commitment from a young age to remain mentally active by participating in social events, do crosswords, and her resiliency and curiosity to learn new things. In addition Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen adapts to any new situation including modern technological advances.

Her years as a Kiwanis advisor for Key Club Colegio Arubano helped her stay socially and technologically savvy. “My Key Clubbers always keep me updated with what is new, from new social media apps, phones, and also new music!” (N. Brinkenberg-Spellen, personal communication, 28 May 2018). Erik Erikson’s Psychosocial Model is a key determinant that also was visible in the interviews of both participants. Both Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen as well as Mr. Ferguson continue to volunteer as Kiwanis members for over more than 40 years, mentor advise and transfer generativity which is “the desire to help and mentor younger persons” (p.217, Hooyman and Kiyak, 2011).
According to Erikson’s theory of development, as the individual experiences different changes throughout the human lifespan, they acquire prime adaptive ego qualities, which helps them develop through life. The opposite of acquiring prime adaptive ego qualities, which results from a successful resolution of the psychosocial crisis at each life stage, is core pathology. In Later adults (age 60 to 75) according to Newman and Newman (2017) acquire the prime adaptive ego quality of care from the psychosocial crisis integrity versus despair followed by the prime adaptive ego quality of wisdom acquired from the psychosocial crisis integrity versus despair.

I was able to relate the balance theory for both of my participants because their commitment to generate and transfer their wisdom and knowledge through their dedication in Kiwanis reflects that of the balance theory. Hooyman and Kiyak (2011) identify this theory as someone who “focuses on transferring their knowledge and wisdom into society rather than using it for personal gain” (p.203). This includes life experiences, social and emotional intelligence and ability to mentor a younger generation. “There is nothing that I love more than sharing knowledge especially my time with the younger ones. It gives me an unexplainable joy and fulfillment (N. Ferguson, personal communication, may 24, 2018).”

Social Aging

As we continue to age our social relationships and roles change as well. Our social systems which includes our family, friends, our work, community and environment all play a significant role in terms of how we see ourselves and the years to come. An aging person’s social support system could have a remarkable impact on the person’s life. Some of the theories of social aging include: role theory, activity theory, disengagement theory, continuity theory,
exchange theory, feminist theory, and critical theory and age stratification theory. For this aspect of the aging process I have chosen activity theory and role theory.

Mr. Ferguson shared that growing up with immigrant parents he had a very different childhood. His parents were very strict “Playing with kids in the neighborhood was a no-no. My parents always thought that other kids influence their kids into mischief. We grew up indoors and even deprived from looking out through the window. (N. Ferguson, personal communication, May 24, 2018).” His role throughout the course of his life was as a son, brother, neighbor, businessman, husband and father.

He also reminisced that it was when he moved to Aruba, got married and established his family he felt his most happiest. “…me and my wife both had a job with good benefits. Two daughters were born in the period and Life got a bit complicated at times. You needed to identify between needs and wants. Luckily we both had successful careers and a supportive network of friends and family”. Both Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen and Mr. Ferguson recalled the age norms that were expected of them which included having a career, getting married, having children and maintain a balanced life.

As time moved along Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen and Mr. Ferguson roles changed from being husband, wife, mother, and father to grandparents, volunteers, and retirees. Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen retired after working as an HR manage and realized that she had to fill in her time with productive activities in order to stay active “I became more involved in volunteering and organizations including Tai-Chi Society, Women’s Club, Kiwanis Club of Aruba etc. especially since I had the time to dedicate for this. I also started a morning routine and became more physically active. Today I enjoy vacationing at least twice a year with my husband who is also retired”(N. Brinkenberg-Spellen, personal communication, 28 May 2018).
In terms of the activity theory that implicates “how individuals adjust to age-related changes” (p.316, Hooyman and Kiyak, 2011) both participants maintained active roles after retiring which included volunteering, grandparenthood, and leisure activities. For Mr. Ferguson this meant becoming more engaged in social activities and physical exercise routine every morning. Additionally Mr. Ferguson commented that one of his social systems that also contribute to his financial stability is that his wife did not retired as yet as compared to Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen.

Although the activity theory does not recognize the personal characteristics of the individual which may account for their ability to cope with role changes I was able to ask both participants what they consider to be their personal qualities which contributes to their successful and healthy aging. For Mr. Ferguson these include: persistence, self-sacrificing, peaceful, joyful and resilient. Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen shared that her qualities and personality includes: self-sufficiency, ability to forgive quickly, peaceful and positive.

Furthermore the social relationship and interaction with neighbors and house pets also became a significant part of Mr. Ferguson’s life especially in his later adulthood years. With a wife who did not retire as yet and with his kids already grown with families of their own, he shared that a companionship at home with his dogs keeps him active and also happy knowing that he has someone to take care for. As cited from Hooyman and Kiyak (2011) “pet owners show higher feelings and emotions of happiness, self-confidence, morale, self-care, alertness, responsiveness, dependability and sense of control (p.375).”
Successful Aging

The World Health Organization suggested six determinants of active aging, which includes: “economic determinants, health and social services, behavioral determinants, personal determinants, physical environment and social determinants”. All of these take in consideration the gender and culture of the individual. Successful aging is defined as “how well individuals adjust to aging is assumed to depend on how well they accept the role changes typical of later years” (Hooyman and Kiyak, 2011). Both participants indicated that the transition from being a son or daughter to becoming a wife, husband, mother or father changed their values meaning that the emphasis was more on family.

Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen shared that she loved her job as a Human Resources Manager and she felt that despite her age she wanted to continue working. After retiring she still misses her occupational role but managed to replace this with other activities and roles as a volunteer. Her optimistic outlook on life and ability to remain resilient has certainly contributed to her ability to age successfully especially during the role changes she has experienced.

Mr. Ferguson shared that when his children grew up, got married and had families of their own, it was a bit difficult to accept especially with an empty household. Additionally in terms of losses Mr. Ferguson shared “My Mom died at age 89 and my Dad died at age 96. They were never in a nursing home, and were never a burden to their children. All my families lived happy long and healthy lives”. This mentioned aspect could be related back to caregiving and how he also chooses to live his older ages by remaining self-sufficient and not being placed in an elderly home.
A few of the identified determinants of successful aging that was visible in the lifestyle of both participants included “absence of disability, high mental functioning, strong social support system, financial security, productivity and independence and staying involved with people who bring meaning and support through their membership and involvement in social clubs”.

Productive Aging

Mr. Ferguson shared that in order for him to continue aging productively, he had to make some necessary lifestyle adjustments “It is no secret that everyone nowadays is trying to live a healthy lifestyle. You can see more people walking, participating in marathons and going to the gym and eating healthy salads. Even though I had a foot (heel) fracture 17 years ago I used to walk every morning until I had 4 operations in the past year. This complicated my ability to exert my body in recent times. However, I have not given up on exercising and eating healthy”.

Productive aging includes aspects such as informal caregiving, investment in cross sector planning, volunteering and civic participation, and collaborative community development. Productive aging is a continued process that never ends. Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen shared that she believes she is aging productively because “I am healthy, fit, enjoying life, and I am living in the moment”. Mr. Ferguson described, “I am currently economically, mentally and physically productive. I see myself aging a bit more and spending more time at home with my wife who is still very energetic and yet to retire. This year she will be 50 years in the labor market.” In regards to informal caregiving, she continues to take care of her family especially her husband by cooking, cleaning and keeping everything well organized.
Both participants indicated that the only source or time of loss that had a significant impact on them was when both of them lost their parents. As an elder this still has some effects or feelings of emptiness on them today, however as they changed and grew new roles of becoming parents and grandparents themselves, they do not experience frequent negative or depressed feelings when reminiscing on the years with their parents as children.

Both participants indicated as well that they believe it is their personal characteristics, which helped them, age more productively and not see aging as something negative or bad. Although they are well aware of their chronological age, they feel mentally, emotionally and at time physically young and active and able to do so much more than the society expects them to.

Right of the Older Person

As we age, we begin to rely more on our resources and social support systems especially considering that some of our motor skills, cognitive abilities and physical capacities to do certain activities begin to decline or diminish. According to the United Nations Rights of the Older Person (1991) there are eighteen set of principles and rights that every country should abide to some of which include as cited from the official document:

1. Every older person should have access to adequate food, water, shelter, clothing and healthcare through the provision of income, family and community support and self-help.

2. Older persons should have the opportunity to work or to have access to other income-generating opportunities.
3. Older persons should be able to participate in determining when and at what pace withdrawal from the labor force takes place.

4. Older persons should be able to seek and develop opportunities for service to the community and to serve as volunteers in positions appropriate to their interests and capabilities.

5. Older persons should be treated fairly regardless of age, gender, racial or ethnic background, disability or other status, and be valued independently of their economic contribution.

I was able to recognize that although in Aruba we have a number of resources and community centers for the elderly such as Club Kibrahacha 60+, Cas Marie, Stichting Ambiente Nobo, Fundacion Arubano pa Invalidonan (FUNARI), and Organizacion di Peshonado Publico Arubano (OPPA). However, when reflecting upon the opportunities for recreation for the elderly these are very limited especially for the elders who do not fall under one or more category of disability or target group. Both participants are actively involved in service organizations where they engage in community service, but also interact, socialize and meet new people during meetings, activities, social and service events and participate in activities that enhance and promote their abilities.

For both participants one area of concern was the subject of living arrangements at old age (nursing or elderly homes) and housing; especially since both participants wish to remain in their own homes when they grow older. Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen shared that although she feels active and able to provide for her self holistically, she is well aware that there might come a point in her life where she should need some additional assistance (for example with IADL). After
experiencing how one of her sister gradually began to decline after being placed in an elderly home, she made the conscious decision of wanting to remain in her own home.

“I saw how other people in the elderly home where not being taken care of. Their basic needs such as getting food on time, get help with showering, and spending some time with them instead of just letting them sit there by themselves (in the sun), it just made me feel really bad. I would never want anyone to go through something like that and feel like your life does not have any worth at such an age” (N. Brinkenberg-Spellen, personal communication, 28 May 2018).

After reflecting on the experience that Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen shared, I was able to identify how the right of the older person was not being respected in terms of getting adequate water, food, opportunity for recreation, and “be treated fairly regardless of age, gender, racial or ethnic background, disability or other status, and be valued independently of their economic contribution”.

During my Field Practice I experience at Centro di Memoria I had the opportunity to visit a few elderly homes in order for me to get a clear idea of how the situation is at some of the private and non-private elderly nursing homes. I was able to identify some of the things Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen shared with me in regards to the facility, lack of support and engagement with the residents of the facility and also the quality of care. Additionally, I was able to recognize how some of the rights of the older persons were violated especially when they were no longer able to provide for themselves or manage their finances. One example was a client, who no longer was able to manage his finances, and his daughter was misusing his pension money and not giving him the quality care he deserves.
As I reflect on how as future Social Worker I could further promote the rights of the older person, I personally believe that it is important that from an early age we talk about the importance of legal and financial decisions that have to be taken care of in a will or testament for example. Additionally, frequent quality controls at elderly homes and more facilities for recreation for the elderly should be made available in order to promote participation and inclusion.

Recommendations

On the various subjects that both participants mentioned during the interview, I was able to reflect and prepare a care plan for Mr. Ferguson who reported that after his surgery, he is no longer as active as he used to be and wish to use his free time with more productive activities. “After my surgeries in the past year, yes, I was obliged to make dietary changes. My Doctors still encourage me to exercise, and to accept that I will continue to live with pain until I die” (N. Ferguson, personal communication, May 24, 2018).

Mr. Ferguson mentioned that because of the busy traffic near his house in the Palm Beach area he does not have much space to do his exercise without the fear that something might happen. In addition, Mr. Ferguson also mentioned that with his wife still being part of the labor market and with an empty nest, he does not have much activities to engage in during the day and that at times it could feel lonely.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem/Concern</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Action Plan/ Care Plan</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate space for physical recreation/exercise</td>
<td>To provide a safe and healthy environment where Mr. Ferguson could do his daily exercise and receive additional one-on-one support guidance from a personal trainer specialized in exercises and activities especially for elders</td>
<td>1. Arrange with a local gym facility (ex. La Cabana gym) a special price or package affordable for pensioned elders where Mr. Ferguson could do exercises including water aerobics and receive one-on-one guidance from a trainer three times a week</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2. Invite Mr. Ferguson to join attend a weekly (2 times a week) Qi Gong class at Centro QuiVit</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3. Engage Mr. Ferguson’s children/family members in family outdoor activities that include physical activities such as</td>
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|   | Lack of meaningful activities to engage in during the morning | To engage Mr. Ferguson in participating in meaningful activities during the morning | 1. Have Mr. Ferguson attend activities at Club Kibrahacha 60+ twice a week in the morning to remain socially and physically active  
2. Empower and encourage Mr. Ferguson to volunteer in the mornings at the local hospital |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | At home care and assistance with household cleaning, taking care of the pets (cleaning after the pets) and remain living in own home instead of nursing home (at old age) | To remain holistically active and age developmentally by receiving the needed assistance and care in Mr. Ferguson’s own home as he continues to age successfully | 1. Ask for assistance from ALFA hulp with cleaning of the household twice a week including help with taking care of the pets  
2. Get in-home care from Wit Gele Kruis when |
|   |   | needed (nursing) |
Personal Reflection and Conclusion

Prior to participating in the course Gerontological Social Work I was personally hesitated about working with the target group older persons. As I was able to learn more about the role of Social Work and the importance and need for more professionals in the Geriatric field, a love and passion grew for my willingness and desire to work in this field. When we received the presentation by Mr. Gino Marchena on the aging population in Aruba and how the aging group is expected to double by the year 2030, I immediately felt a need to dedicate my profession and life towards serving this group through advocacy, policy and legislation and also in the Social Work process.

The aging process is a process often feared by many. Through this course I have came to the realization that healthy and productive aging is not an end point but rather a never ending journey that needs to be taken seriously from an early age on. After interviewing both participants I have taken into consideration the advice they gave on productive aging as well as the tips that Dr. Waterloo shared on ways to reduce the likelihood of getting Dementia by making healthy dietary choices, reduce alcohol and smoking, consume less fatty and unhealthy foods, and exercising regular.

As a future Social Worker it is important that I understand the different challenges that people in old age experience as well the challenges that their social systems experience (i.e informal caregivers who experience stress). Furthermore, I was able to see the link between the theories and concepts presented in class with the personal experiences of both participants. Prior to reflecting on how I can contribute to aging healthier and productive, I did not take my health and other necessary adjustments seriously because I was not aware that my lifestyle choices of today could have a significant by the time I reach the age of 60. Today, as I see both Mrs.
Brinkenberg-Spellen as well as Mr. Ferguson age productively and healthy, I aspire to reach old age in the best shape as possible, being emotionally, physically, psychologically and holistically happy and healthy.

As a future Social Worker I have also become more aware of the different aspects such as economic and financial situation, educational background, ethnicity and other diverse components which may play a role in a person’s ability to age successfully, healthy and productively. Therefore it is of significant importance that as future Social Workers we become aware of the social issues affecting the target group of older persons and which implications could benefit or assist in making the caregiving process and promoting independence, dignity and respect of the older person on a holistic and developmental level.

I was able to conclude from my interview with Mr. Ferguson and Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen that their social support systems, their personal characteristics which included perseverance, resilience, positive outlook on life and their commitment to living a healthy and physically active lifestyle are to thank for their ability to live a healthy life; aging successfully, productively and actively. Additional sources that were mentioned for their ability to get the best health resources were our healthcare system (AZV), ability to be eligible for pension (pension money), variety of local community centers and service clubs, and also the flourishing economy of Aruba which gives them access to medical care, doctors, and treatment plans that other people from other parts of the world do not have.

A change of lifestyle can have numerous benefits including reducing the risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, Dementia, heart diseases and so many more. After I was able to understand how our lifestyle choices impact our life expectancy and our ability to age
successfully and productively, I have made the commitment to live a healthier and more physically active lifestyle by reducing my consumption of alcohol, smoking and sugary or unhealthy foods. I admire how both of my participants continue to strive and enjoy the stage of life they are in, after all as Mrs. Brinkenberg-Spellen concluded “Life starts after the age of 60”.
Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Dear participant,

I, Keyla Reeder, second year student of the Social Work and Development program at the University of Aruba would first like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview for the course Gerontological Social Work (ASWD-CC34-12) given by Mrs. Gyseth Nuesch. For my final assessment paper for the course Gerontological Social Work I had the assignment of interviewing an older person of 60 years or older in order to get a better understanding and insightful understanding of the aging process, productive and successful aging. Through this interview I would be able to make a final reflection paper where I would combine theory and practice using your personal experience as a person who is productively, actively and successful aging.

Definition of Aging

According to Hooyman and Kiyak (2011) aging is defined as “changes that take place in the organism throughout the life span-good, bad, and neutral from development to maturation to senescence”.

Terms of Agreement

1. I understand the purpose of this research is part of the Gerontological Social Work course from the University of Aruba, Social Work & Development, BA2 research conducted by Ms. Keyla Reeder.

2. I understand the objective of this interview is to gather qualitative information and personal experience as an aging person.

3. I understand that a final reflection paper will be written and that some of my narratives will be used without any personal identifiable information.

4. I understand that my identity will remain anonymous and any information that I share that I would not want to be on record, I would let the student know beforehand.

By signing in the form below, you are giving your consent to be part of this interview.

____________________  ___________________
Participant  Student: Keyla Reeder
Appendix B: Interview with an Older Person Questionnaire

The Aging Process

1. What is your current age and where were you born?
2. How did you experience your childhood and early teenage years?
3. How did you experience your adulthood years (25-50 years)?
4. What were the first (physical) signs you noticed when you realized you are aging?
5. What would you consider to be one of your personal characteristics?
6. How do you consider your social and physical environment to be (ex. your neighborhood, living situation) from 15 years ago and now?
7. How do you consider your social environment to be (social support, network, family, friends)?
8. Do you think you have sufficient and adequate health care and social services?
9. Do you consider yourself to be a resilient person (someone who is able to thrive despite adversity in your life)?

Lifestyle

1. How would you consider your lifestyle choices to be (health, not healthy, room for improvement) and why?
2. How do you feel at the moment (emotionally, physically, spiritually, socially, and economically) in terms of stability, wellbeing, ability and security)?
3. Have you ever suffered multiple losses throughout your life (ex. divorce, death, separation)? If so, how was this affect and changed you and the way you look at life?
4. Did you make any necessary changes (ex. dietary changes, physical movement, emotional stability) in the last years?
5. Are you currently working?
6. Are you currently fully productive economically, physically and mentally?
7. Do you consider yourself to be successfully aging?
8. Do you consider yourself to be productively aging?
9. Do you suffer from any health related problems? are there any health related illnesses/diseases in your family?

10. What are some challenges or concerns you currently have at this age?

11. What are some personal goals you have for yourself for the upcoming 5-10 years?

12. How do you see yourself in 5-10 years?

13. What do you believe is necessary for a person to be able to age successfully?
Figure 1 Interviewee Mrs. N. Brinkenberg-Spellen (67)

Figure 2 Interviewee Mr. N. Ferguson (73)
References


