The Third Age Project: Baby Boomer Women and the Meaningful Life

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Abstract

Baby boomer women in the Third Age may have a deep desire to live meaningful lives. This desire will possibly be rooted in the ideals of the Third Age, the increased desire for meaning as people age, the expectation of personal freedom that many baby boomer women have been socialized to expect, and perhaps the influence of Oprah Winfrey with her message of female empowerment in the pursuit of meaning. However, this large cohort of women must also navigate the constraints of a patriarchal system, and the confusing and conflicting identities made available to them. If the goal of creating meaning is not realized, an existential vacuum can result, which may lead to emotional distress, and potential psychological devastation. The aim of this capstone is to review the literature on the Third Age in baby boomer women and to propose therapy that facilitates deep self-reflection, the identification of personal values, and the creation of meaningful lives that reflect those values. The proposed therapy, The Third Age Project, incorporates aspects of Jungian depth psychology, existential therapy, feminist therapy, internal family systems therapy, and brain music therapy. It attends to this type of deep reflective work for the purpose of supporting women on the journey to meaning in which their lives are aligned with personal values.

Keywords: baby boomer, Third Age, meaning, personal values, the Third Age Project

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Chapter 1

The baby boom generation is currently arriving at the traditional age of retirement in record numbers (Tyler, 2018). Baby boomers are continuing to exert their considerable influence by challenging traditional approaches to aging, generally viewing the post-retirement years as a time of growth and possibility rather than one of decline (Tyler, 2018). Many in this cohort actually continue to work in some capacity, but often pivot to encore careers they deem more fulfilling than work done previously (Genoe, 2018). This emerging cultural phenomenon has been designated the Third Age (Laslett, 1991) and has resulted in generally high expectations for this time of life (Palmer, 2019). However, despite the changing milieu, women still find themselves being oppressed by a patriarchal system that seeks to marginalize them and create barriers to personal fulfillment and the promise of the Third Age (Radtke et al., 2016).

The aim of this capstone is to explore the research problem that will form the basis for this literature review. In this chapter, I will discuss the underlying research problem. In chapter 2, I will review the literature related to the problem and in chapter 3, I will propose a unique therapeutic approach that will seek to optimize a sense of personal fulfillment for baby boomer women in the Third Age of life.

Background to the Research Problem

Despite the fact that baby boomers in the Western world are generally embracing this new approach to aging, the phenomenon is receiving very little attention in the psychology literature, especially as it relates to the experience of women (Radtke et al., 2016). Baby boomers indeed seem to have high expectations for the Third Age (Palmer, 2019), and these expectations may be significantly higher for women, many of whom may have been influenced by Oprah

Winfrey's message of female empowerment and the importance of living a life of meaning and purpose (Harris & Watson, 2014). Therefore, many baby boomer women may view the relative freedom associated with the Third Age (Palmer, 2019) as the ideal time to achieve this goal. Weiss (2002) points out that the Third Age offers an opportunity to consider what is meaningful apart from previous roles that may have been assumed in response to systemic pressures. Additionally, this desire to live a meaningful life takes on a greater sense of urgency as people age and begin to feel the constraint of time (Yalom, 2013). Furthermore, this cohort of older women grew up in the context of the second wave of feminism (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012) and it is therefore possible that they will expect equality in terms of the availability of the optimistic identities associated with the Third Age. Collectively, these factors seem to indicate that it is reasonable to assume that Third Age baby boomer women will have a deep desire to create meaningful lives.

However, the reality for many women, is that despite a desire for meaning, persistent societal pressures seek to lock them in identities of the patriarchal culture that separate them from their personal values, and thus the ability to create meaningful lives (Van Mens- Verhulst & Radtke, 2013). Additionally, when women are unable to achieve the meaning to which they aspire, wellbeing is often diminished in a dramatic fashion, and feelings such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, emptiness, insecurity, guilt, and despair can quickly take hold (Senkovich, 2016). Bargdill et al. (2019) support this view by stating that meaning is not simply a desire, but a fundamental human need. Hollis (2005) emphasizes this point by stating that "meaninglessness inhibits the fullness of life and is therefore equivalent to illness" (p.17). The distressing feelings of living without meaning can lead to destructive behaviours in an attempt to assuage the existential pain (Roche, 2020; Senkovich, 2016). Recent studies suggest that the

current cohort of older adults is consuming more alcohol than previous generations, with a higher incidence of alcohol use disorder, and greater negative consequences for women than men (Roche et al., 2020). Furthermore, such self-destructive behaviours can then cause problems in every domain of life, especially in the area of relationships (Senkovich, 2016), which the scholarly literature suggests is very closely connected to meaning (Bargdill, 2019; Frankl, 1985; Palmer, 2019).

The conclusion, therefore, that arises from this background information is that there will quite possibly be a discrepancy for baby boomer women between the expectations they hold for creating meaning in the Third Age, and the reality of actually being able to do so. This discrepancy holds the potential for "existential frustration" (Frankl, 1985, p. 67), which is the psychological distress related to a perceived lack of meaning in one's life. Frankl (1985) states that, if the meaning-making task is unsuccessful, an "existential vacuum" (p. 70) will form, which is a psychological phenomenon that manifests as an emptiness inside that can lead to depression, addiction, and even suicide. Furthermore, Frankl notes that people will often try to fill the vacuum with superficial pleasures that only serve to make the problem worse over time. He emphasizes that filling the vacuum with meaning and purpose, which often requires therapeutic intervention, is the path to psychological peace and fulfillment.

Purpose

The purpose of this capstone is to review the literature and propose what constitutes a meaningful life. I will also propose how therapists might facilitate the path to meaning for Third Age baby boomer women. The answer to this question will be gleaned from an extensive literature review that asks: What is the Third Age and how might it affect expectations for early old age? What are the challenges of the Third Age? What constitutes a meaningful life? What are

the benefits of a meaningful life? What is the significance of meaning in the Third Age? What are the barriers that Third Age baby boomer women face in the pursuit of meaning? What are the therapeutic approaches that could be helpful to women in creating meaningful lives?

The results of the literature review will form the framework for a proposed therapeutic approach entitled The Third Age Project, that will support and guide Third Age baby boomer women on their journey to meaningful lives.

Definition of Terms

Baby boom generation refers to the cohort of those born post World War II between 1946 and 1964 (Martel & Menard, 2018).

Logotherapy is a form of existential psychotherapy developed by Viktor Frankl that emphasizes the importance of meaning in life (Frankl, 1985)

Soul refers to the psyche or the mind in the context of Jungian depth psychology (Hollis, 2020).

Successful aging refers to being free of disability and disease, having high physical and cognitive abilities, and interacting with others in a meaningful way (Rowe & Khan, 1987).

Comorbidities refers to medical conditions that exist simultaneously (Shahid et al., 2020).

Encore career refers to a career that one engages in after retirement that may be similar to previous work or in a completely different field (Tyler, 2018).

Significance

The significance of this capstone project derives primarily from the large number of baby boomers currently entering the Third Age of life. According to Statistics Canada (2018), the baby boom lasted close to 20 years, with 8.2 million babies being born during that period of time, with an average of close to 412,000 being born each year. These numbers are significant when compared to the 377,886 babies born in 2008 when the population was double the size of

the baby boom years. Furthermore, in 2011, Canadian baby boomers began turning 65, the

traditional age of retirement, and by 2031, all baby boomers will have reached the age of 65 and

will likely comprise about 25% of the population (Martel and Menard, 2018). The numbers are

even higher in the United States with post-retirement baby boomers comprising about one third

of the American population (Tyler, 2018). Indeed, this is the trend in all of the Western world

(Carpenter-Aeby, 2017).

   Several additional factors also contribute to the significance of this capstone project. It is

clear that baby boomers are pioneering life in the Third Age, and doing so with minimal

structural support (Tyler, 2018). Additionally, the high expectations associated with the Third

Age could very well intersect with societal limitations placed on aging women and result in

significant emotional distress. Furthermore, women are generally quite comfortable exploring

emotional material (Pipher, 2019), which might result in them being more willing to seek

psychotherapy to achieve their goals.

   It appears also that the seemingly profound cultural impact of Oprah Winfrey must be

considered, and further highlights the significance of this capstone project. Collett (2019)

describes Winfrey as a woman of tremendous influence, with the power to inspire people in a

meaningful way, particularly in relation to the empowerment of women. Lofton & Weber (2012)

state that Winfrey's influence grew out of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in which she appeared on

television every weekday for 25 years. They state that the show gave her an accessible platform

for her message of female empowerment and living a meaningful life. According to Lofton &

Weber (2012), by the time the show ended in 2011, it was licensed in 150 countries around the

world and seen by 40 million people each week in the United States alone. Peck (2010) echoes

the notion of her vast influence by stating that, by the end of the 1990s, Winfrey was considered

a "cultural icon" (p. 7), and was included in *Time* magazine's inaugural list of the 100 most

influential people in the world, an honour that was subsequently bestowed on her many times.

The Oprah Winfrey Show had mass appeal (Peck, 2010) with a multiethnic audience

(Harris & Watson, 2014) but according to Peck (2010) her followers were largely upper and

middle-class white women. Harris & Watson (2014) state:

> In 2001, the audience for The Oprah Winfrey Show consisted of 72 percent women, a
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> figure that has remained fairly consistent since the show started in syndication in 1986.
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> According to Nielsen Media Research, the show's average daily audience consisted of
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> 5,022,000 women aged eighteen and over in the period between October 2000 and
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> September 2001. Of those 5-million-plus women, 4,112,000 identified themselves as
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> white; 1,856,000 of these white viewers were between the ages of eighteen and forty-
>
> nine, and 2,256,000 were fifty and older (p. 53).

McClerking (2019) states that research done in 2007 by Nielsen Media Research revealed

Winfrey's audience was primarily women over the age of 55, comprising 2.7 million of the 3.7

million people over age 55 who were regularly watching her show. Peck (2010) explains that

Winfrey's iconic status grew beyond her talk show primarily because of the exponential

expansion of her media empire and explains that "her legendary ability to sell products, ideas,

causes, and even people is now widely referred to as the Oprah Effect" (p. 7). Furthermore, "The

synergy of her talk show, book club, website, magazine, radio channel, personal growth tours,

YouTube channel, Facebook page, and cable television network have made Winfrey 'The Queen

of All Media' (Peck, 2010, p. 8).

Peck (2010) notes that Winfrey's Personal Growth Summits, which are large stadium

events that draw her legions of fans, encapsulate her worldview that people are capable of

shaping their own destinies, and that self-transformation is possible if the mind is engaged and the will to change is there. Furthermore, Harris and Watson (2014) point to the "something-from-nothing legend" (p. 55) that is the cornerstone of Winfrey's personal story—the rising from a life of struggle to create one of meaning and purpose. This, according to Peck (2010) has been a significant aspect of her appeal and ability to inspire and has made her "the personification of the empowered woman" (p. 12).

Therefore, the research strongly suggests that Oprah Winfrey has achieved global iconic status since the inception of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 1986, and that her message of female empowerment and the importance of creating meaning in life continues to the present day (Collett, 2019). It thus seems reasonable to conclude that Winfrey's message may have inspired many baby boomer women now in the Third Age of life to live lives of meaning and purpose.

Collectively, these factors suggest that the coming years might possibly see baby boomer women in large numbers seeking psychological support in response to feelings of distress associated with barriers to creating meaningful lives. It follows that therapists should be prepared to create and provide therapeutic support for these women that is uniquely tailored to the complexities of being a baby boomer woman in the Third Age of life.

Chapter Summary

The baby boom generation has significantly impacted Western culture and will likely continue to do so by redefining and challenging traditional approaches to aging (Tyler, 2018). In particular, it seems that baby boomers are choosing to fully engage in life well into the years traditionally viewed as a time of decline (Palmer, 2019). Furthermore, baby boomer women, who experienced their formative years in the context of the second wave of feminism and have quite possibly been influenced by Oprah Winfrey, might arrive at the Third Age with a deep desire to

live meaningful lives; but will need to navigate persistent societal barriers to achieve this goal. It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that a discrepancy might exist between the desire for a meaningful life and the reality of being able to achieve it, which could result in significant psychological distress (Senkovich, 2016). This psychological distress might therefore bring Third Age baby boomer women to therapy in significant numbers.

It must be noted that the research points clearly to the fact that the possibilities of the Third Age, as well as the desire and opportunity to create meaning in life exists primarily in the domain of privilege (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012; Radtke et al., 2016; Van Mens-Verhulst & Radtke, 2013). Therefore, throughout this capstone, any reference to Third Age baby boomer women will imply women of privilege.

In the next chapter, I will review the literature related to: the concept of meaning in life; the value in the creation of a meaningful life, especially in the context of the Third Age; the societal barriers that baby boomer women in the Third Age must navigate in order to achieve this goal; the potentially devastating psychological implications of not achieving it; and the hope associated with a number of therapeutic approaches that can help connect Third Age baby boomer women to their personal values, and thus to uniquely meaningful lives.

Chapter 2

Introduction

In chapter 1, I suggested that many baby boomer women in the Third Age will quite possibly have a deep desire to live meaningful lives (Bargdill et al., 2019; Palmer, 2019; Weiss, 2002), but will encounter societal constraints that impede the realization of this goal (Radtke et al., 2016; Muhlbauer et al., 2018). This lack of meaning can result in psychological distress (Frankl, 1985; Senkovich et al., 2016; Yalom, 2013), which might very well bring this cohort of women to therapy in significant numbers.

In chapter 2, I will review the literature related to meaning in life, meaning in the context of the Third Age, meaning for women in the context of the Third Age, and therapeutic approaches that can facilitate the creation of a meaningful life for baby boomer women in the Third Age. I will also consider how the current COVID-19 pandemic may be affecting meaning, especially for women in the Third Age of life.

 The Meaningful Life

According to Martela and Steger (2016), the increased interest in well-being in recent years has resulted in numerous rigorous studies related to meaning in life, and the emergence of the three primary domains of meaning: The first domain is coherence, which is the idea that life has structure and comprehensibility, uncertainty is minimized, and life makes sense. The second domain is purpose, which is the manifestation of motivation to work toward goals that are aligned with values. The third domain is significance, which is the feeling that one's life matters, has importance, and is worth living.

King et al. (2006) further explain that meaning is often connected to a larger framework such as a philosophy or a religion. For example, one's philosophy could be that "people are

basically good" (p. 192). Frankl (1985) describes meaning as occurring in the context of personal accomplishments, experiences in nature, or interpersonal relationships. Yalom (2013) states that meaning projects are often self-transcendent, such as creative endeavours, commitment to a cause, concern for others, or love for the divine. For example, Yalom states that he has always considered the work of a psychotherapist to be a calling rather than a profession, and one that is naturally imbued with meaning because it takes the individual beyond himself into the realm of helping others. Czikszentmihalyi (1990) warns that the contemplation required for the creation of a meaningful life is elusive when individuals choose to focus on superficial goals that cause them to lose touch with feelings and personal values. Bargdill et al. (2019) state that a meaningful life is created when individuals align personal values with goals and behaviour, which results in the experience of cohesiveness, purpose, and significance.

The value of a meaningful life is well supported in the scholarly literature, as meaning is often accompanied by a vast array of benefits across many domains, some of which include: the consolidation of identity (Bargdill et al., 2019; Radtke et al., 2016); bringing order to chaos and a resulting sense of control and personal agency (Bargdill et al., 2019; Palmer, 2019); facilitating psychic harmony and a sense of inner peace (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990); buffering stress and improving psychological resilience (Hanson, 2018; Hollis, 2020; Hooker et al., 2018; Reilley et al., 2017); improving physical health (Hooker et al., 2018); potentially transforming struggle into personal growth (Brown, 2013; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Frankl, 1985; Hollis, 2020; Kessler, 2020); and deepening compassion and connection to others (Frankl, 1985; Reilley et.al, 2017).

Meaning and the Third Age

The Third Age, first described by Laslett (1991) remains an emerging cultural phenomenon that is spreading throughout the Western world, delineating a marked difference

between young old age (the Third Age) and later old age (the Fourth Age)—the time at which

individuals are no longer capable of independent living. Laslett (1991) observed that baby

boomers were approaching the traditional time of retirement with more vigour than previous

generations, and that this new vigour seemed to be generating higher expectations for how this

stage of life should be lived. Research has continued to track the development of the Third Age

phenomenon (Bass, 2000; Carr, 2011; Cosco et al., 2017; Cuyvers et al., 2018; Gilleard & Higgs,

2007; Palmer et al., 2019; van Mens-Verhulst & Radtke, 2013), a stage of life that could

conceivably extend 20-30 years due to advances in medicine and the general adoption of a

healthier lifestyle (Tyler, 2018). West et al. (2016) conclude that "what best characterizes the

Third Age is the will to eschew age as a primary marker of identity and actively embrace the

possibilities and the active exclusion of agedness" (p. 1879).

Furthermore, according to Pruchno and Carr (2017), the term "successful aging" (p. 201),

coined by Rowe and Kahn (1987) constituted a major shift in the field of gerontology, and

changed it from one of disease and decline to one of growth and possibility. These authors note

that the concept emerged in response to global concern about the resources required to support a

large aging population and sought to empower individuals to age well and maintain health and

wellbeing for as long as possible. According to Bauger and Bongaardt (2017), the field of

gerontology is now concerned with health promotion initiatives with the hope of extending the

Third Age and compressing the Fourth Age, a concept referred to as "compression theory"

(Karisto, 2007, p.102). The realization of this goal would possibly lead to even higher

expectations regarding the possibilities for the Third Age of life.

Therefore, the baby boom generation has created an optimistic view of aging. However,

Barnes (2011) states, "The Third Age must be characterized as a paradox—a time of divergent

trajectories" (p.4) that includes possibilities as well as vulnerabilities and challenges. Yalom

(2013) points out that as people age, they often become plagued with the primary existential

fears of death, isolation, meaninglessness, and the double-edged sword of responsibility and

freedom. Senkovich (2016) emphasizes that concern about meaning plagues every stage of life,

but Yalom (2013) states that when this concern is faced in the later stages, it is often

accompanied by profound fear and anxiety as individuals must confront the limitation of time.

The literature also suggests that the emergence of the Third Age, with its accompanying

expectations of independence and productivity, has intensified existential fear because it exists in

the shadow of the dreaded Fourth Age when all personal agency will be lost (West et al., 2017).

This fear exists in part because these two stages of life are not designated by age but by function,

and therefore individuals have no idea how long their independence and freedom will last (West

et al., 2017). People can often feel young well into old age, but the threat of illness is constantly

looming (Pipher, 2019).

The Third Age, therefore, is highly valued for its promise of freedom, personal agency,

and productivity, but it is also under constant threat (Palmer, 2019). Despite the realistic hope of

many healthy years (Palmer, 2019), individuals in the Third Age of life will eventually be

confronted with the vulnerabilities associated with aging, and the accompanying anxiety

(Froidevaux & Hirschi, 2015). Furthermore, Froideveaux and Hirschi (2015) explain that an

important aspect of meaning later in life is the successful resolution of the final developmental

stage of Erikson's (1959) identity theory—integrity versus despair. The authors note that this

task requires deep reflection about how one's life has been lived, which leads to a conclusion

about whether life was worthwhile or insignificant. Thus, Froideveaux and Hirschi (2015)

emphasize the value of attending to meaning later in life to ensure the successful resolution of

this final developmental task so that life can end in a state of psychological peace, instead of regret and despair.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that the Third Age holds the potential for other concerns and challenges such as: identity issues, especially related to female identity and the spaces that are available to women as they age (Muhlbauer et al., 2018; Radtke et al., 2016; van Mens-Verhulst & Radtke, 2013), ageism that tends to disregard the unique experiences and abilities of older people (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012; McHugh, 2016; Tyler, 2018), and being overburdened with responsibilities such as caregiving, which often falls to women (Carpenter-Aeby, 2017; Pipher, 2019). Additionally, Hilton et al. (2009), consider the baby boom generation to be the "sandwich generation" (p. 40), referring to the fact that individuals in this cohort are often caring for aging parents while simultaneously caring for their children or grandchildren. Additionally, losses of various kinds, including the death of loved ones and the emergence of health problems, can be a significant aspect of life at this time (Pipher, 2019).

While these challenges can be barriers to the ideals of the Third Age, they might also be viewed as opportunities for personal growth and meaning, a concept first brought forth by Viktor Frankl (1985) and subsequently supported in the literature (Brown, 2013; Csikzentmihalyi, 1990; Hollis, 2005; Martela & Steiger, 2016). Furthermore, the literature strongly suggests that the antidote for the existential fear that accompanies the Third Age is the creation of meaning (Bargdill, 2019; Frankl, 1985; Yalom, 2013). Although Frankl's (1985) work is riddled with masculine language, it seems that it might hold wisdom that could be used by Third Age baby boomer women in their struggle to create meaningful lives.

In his seminal book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Frankl, 1985), Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl tells his story of surviving as a prisoner in the Nazi concentration camps during

World War II. This experience led to the development of his existential model of psychotherapy, which he called logotherapy, that focused on the importance of meaning in life. Frankl theorized that although people often have little or no control over the circumstances of their lives, they can decide how they respond to those circumstances. He stated, "Everything can be taken away from a man but one thing—the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (Frankl, 1985, p. 47). Frankl believed that people need to accept suffering as part of the human condition and view it as a portal to meaning, which he considered the motivational force for humankind. He emphasized that meaning was unique to each individual and finding it, especially in the context of suffering, was the task of humanity. Frankl (1985) concluded that when meaning is found in suffering, it allows individuals to not only cope, but to grow and thrive.

According to Palmer (2019), the existential task of the Third Age is to enjoy the here and now while simultaneously accepting that problems will arise in the future and personal autonomy will be minimized or completely lost (Palmer, 2019). This task requires that individuals have a firm grasp on their personal values and create a meaningful life that will buffer the anxiety associated with this time of renegotiation and adaptation to a new reality and a new perspective on life (Palmer, 2019). Indeed, "personal meaning is a complex achievement of the human spirit and is found in the individual's confrontation with challenges of the world and one's own being" (Langle, 2004, p. 28). Furthermore, Hollis (2005) states:

> The second half of life presents a rich possibility for spiritual enlargement, for we are
> never going to have greater powers of choice, never more lessons of history from which
> to learn, and never possess more emotional resilience, more insight into what works for

us and what does not, or a deeper, sometimes desperate, conviction of the importance of

getting our life back (p. 18).

Meaning, the COVID-19 Pandemic, and the Third Age

Frankl's (1985) theory of finding meaning in suffering might be especially pertinent at

this time in history as the world grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic, which is considered "an

extraordinary situation for our generation" (de Jong et al., 2020, p. 1). De Jong et al. (2020) state

that grief experts agree, the pandemic has resulted in a global grief response as people deal with

sadness associated with losses of every kind—among them, the loss of loved ones to the virus,

jobs, housing, social engagement, and routines. Furthermore, according to Shahid et al. (2020),

the COVID-19 pandemic is causing significantly worse outcomes for older adults due to the

higher incidence of comorbidities in this population. These extensive losses and feelings of

vulnerability could also negatively impact meaning and leave people feeling hopeless, lost, and

in need of guidance to create or recreate meaning (De Jong et al., 2020).

It therefore could be that the Covid-19 pandemic holds the potential to amplify existing

existential concerns for individuals in the Third Age, while simultaneously curtailing activities

that help them create meaning. However, it also seems that, like the Third Age itself, the

pandemic could be considered a paradox—one that is causing profound loss and distress, but

also providing an opportunity for self-reflection and personal growth. Hollis (2020) states, "From

time to time life humbles us and calls us to account, leads us back to the drawing board, and asks

us to start over" (p.119). It seems possible that the COVID-19 pandemic might be one of those

times.

Additionally, since men generally earn more money than women (Muhlbauer et al.,

2018), it is also possible that women will bear the burden of caregiving and unpaid emotional

labour while men continue to fully engage in their work. It therefore stands to reason that the

COVID-19 pandemic holds the potential to further disadvantage and disempower women now

and well into the future.

Women, Identity, Meaning, and the Third Age

Women's experience of the Third Age of life is significantly different from that of men

and, therefore, it cannot be adequately studied without attending to gender (van Mens-Verhulst

& Radtke, 2013). The ideals of the Third Age can often be unavailable to women, who are more

likely than men to be forced into circumstances in which they have limited freedom to choose

(Cuyvers et al., 2018).

One of the ways to study available discourses is to examine representation in popular

culture. Lemish and Muhlbauer (2012) studied the representations of older women in film and

television and determined that "older women are double-marginalized, that is, by age as well as

gender" (p. 1). The authors identify four progressive stages in the development of these

representations. The first is the invisibility stage, in which older women are under-represented

across cultures, which more easily allows women to be excluded in many aspects of real life. The

second stage is the stereotypization stage, in which older women are often placed in the role of

the domineering mother, a representation that is evident in many successful television shows and

reflects a deeply held view of older women in society. An example of this stereotype is

"George's mother on *Seinfeld*" (p. 4). Another dominant stereotype is that of the older woman as

the plain, uneducated, supportive housewife. An example of this is "Edith Bunker in *All in the*

Family" (p. 4). Yet another popular stereotype is the "bitch-witch older woman" (p. 4) who is

often envious of younger, more beautiful women. An example of this is "Cruella de Vil in *101*

Dalmatians" (p. 4). The third stage is the ghettoization stage, which refers to programs that

feature an all-minority cast and focuses on the characteristics of that group, such as shows

exclusively about black people or exclusively about LGBTQ people. One example that relates to

older women is *The Golden Girls* (p. 5)—a show that featured four older, privileged women

whose characters were profoundly lacking in complexity. The fourth is the integration phase, the

most advanced stage which seems to indicate that the media has responded to the civil rights

movements that have advanced society, and also to the growing power of the baby boom

generation who were at the forefront of these movements. There is a growing presence of aging

women in film and television that has resulted in interesting portrayals by older actors such as

Diane Keaton, Meryl Streep, Helen Mirren, and others. However, Lemish and Muhlbauer (2012)

note that the images of these women, often portrayed as powerful and multi-dimensional, can

send the false message that the work of feminism is done. Furthermore, Muhlbaeur et al. (2018)

note that the late "Ruth Bader Ginsburg, an octogenarian justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, has

become a feminist icon for millennials (Carmon & Knizhnik, 2015)"(p. 505). The authors state,

however, that women such as Ginsburg are cultural outliers and, although they provide hope to

many women, they are the exception and not the rule. Additionally, Lemish and Muhlbauer,

(2012) note that older women who achieve prominence, such as Hillary Clinton and Angela

Merkel, are often diminished by the media in a way that their male counterparts are not, most

notably by attention to and criticism of their appearance.

A Canadian study (Radtke et al., 2016) examined the identities of Third Age women and

the role that gender plays in the shaping of identity and meaning. The authors began with a

literature review that identified "four pairs of discursive repertoires of aging that made available

eight corresponding subject positions or identities" (p. 18): biological decline versus physical

capability, cognitive decline versus a time of wisdom, social marginality versus deserving special

treatment, and a natural process versus transcendence and adaptation. The participants then engaged in an interview that asked questions related to their views on the meaning of aging and their aging identities, the way in which they connected meaning and the Third Age, and whether they were encountering challenges related to being an aging woman in society. The interviews were then analyzed, with special attention to the moments when the relevancy of gender became evident.

Radtke et al. (2016) commented that the women in their study viewed aging as a natural process of decline in physical, cognitive, and social capabilities. They mostly compensated for these discourses however, with other discourses of adapting to the aging process and remaining physically capable. The authors noted that the experience of aging was associated with the context of one's life. The study pointed to the significance of the baby boomer cohort growing up with the second wave of feminism as the backdrop of their formative years, and the ways this historical milieu affects how women engage with the available discourses. Additionally, Muhlbauer et al. (2018) echo this point by stating that this cohort experienced a more liberal and egalitarian society than any previous generation of women, and therefore have a greater awareness of the evolving discourses related to identities that are available to them.

Radtke et al. (2016) state that the women in their study felt a continuity between the past and the present. Muhlbauer et al. (2018) state that this continuity can give Third Age women a feeling of agelessness and the sense that their chronological age does not impact the way they feel or behave. These authors state that this sense of continuity and agelessness is often evidenced in the way many Third Age baby boomer women dress youthfully, maintain a busy schedule, and continue to balance various needs and interests as they did in their younger years. Additionally, Muhlbauer et al. (2018) note that, alongside the younger self, new selves emerge

with new associated hopes, meanings, and anxieties. This "convergence of multiple selves is an identity issue for older women, because many of these selves have conflicting roles" (p. 513). Thus, Mulbauer et al. (2018) explain that "feelings of confusion, ambiguity, disorientation, self-questioning, and indeterminacy can be part of many women's experience" (p. 513). Radtke et al. (2016) note that this ageless attitude of many women currently in the Third Age makes sense in the culture of Western society, but also "highlights the need for older women to continually defend their value as persons who matter" (p. 23).

Muhlbauer et al. (2018) state, however, that the economic lens is probably the best way to view the inequalities that exist between older men and women. The authors state that older women are poorer than older men, and that the economic status of older women is a reflection of their younger lives, especially in relation to parenting, work, and marital status. O'Reilly (2016) states that baby boomer women got caught in the trap of intensive mothering that served to limit their power by keeping them from fully engaging in their work lives, thus setting them up to be financially disadvantaged and generally disempowered later in life.

Radtke et al. (2016) conclude that the current cohort of women in the Third Age have a variety of discourses available to negotiate identity and meaning. Muhlbauer et al. (2018) emphasize that the available discourses are often complex and conflicting, and it becomes challenging to balance and prioritize the overlapping gender roles and lifestyle choices. Radtke et al. (2016) conclude that, "for women in the Third Age to benefit from their social capital (Muhlbauer & Crisler, 2012), they need to be skilled negotiators in order to navigate the complex discursive space of aging" (p. 23). Additionally, Radtke et al. (2016) state that the multiple contradictory versions of aging challenges the popular assumption that the old-person identity is

connected to chronological age, and also questions the value of patriarchal discourses related to the loss of beauty and femininity as women age.

Radtke et al. (2016) posit that the research on aging is generally not done in a way that examines the intersection of age and gender, which allows for the perpetuation of a "male-centered theory" (p. 16) that does not reflect the experience of women. One example of this, according to the authors, is the linear way in which the careers of men often evolve without interruption. Muhlbauer et al. (2018) state that there is a need to study baby boomer women in order to understand the complexity of their experience in the Third Age. Bargdill et al. (2019) claim that meaning is the foothold of identity and, according to Muhlbauer et al. (2018), there is considerable confusion for older women in the search for meaning in this complex construction of Third Age identities. Radtke et al. (2016) state that feminist therapy can offer these women space for exploration of the possibilities as well as the constraints, and the ways in which the challenges might be transformed to meaning.

Therapeutic Approaches

The literature review reveals that the path to the creation of a meaningful life for women in the Third Age requires a number of elements: opportunities for deep reflection (Bardgill et al., 2019; Czikszentmihalyi, 1990; Palmer, 2019; Yalom, 2013), identification of personal values (Frankl, 1985; Hollis, 2020; Radtke et al., 2016; Yalom, 2013), identification of barriers to connecting to personal values and achieving meaning (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012; Muhlbauer et al., 2018; Radtke et al., 2016; van Mens-Verhulst et al., 2013), identification of ways to overcome these barriers (Hollis, 2005; Hollis, 2018; Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012; Muhlbauer et al., 2018; Radtke et al., 2016; van Mens-Verhulst et al., 2013), and alignment of personal values,

behaviour, and goals (Bargdill, 2019; Czikszentmihalyi, 1990; de Jong et al., 2020; Froiedeveaux, 2015; Israeli & Santor, 2000; Radtke et al., 2016; Schippers & Zeigler, 2019).

The scholarly literature also points to a number of therapeutic approaches that are well suited to this deeply reflective work: depth psychology (Diamond, 2018; Hollis, 2005; Hollis, 2018; Hollis, 2020), existential therapy (Cooper, 2016; Langle, 2003; Yalom, 2013), feminist therapy (Brown, 2016; Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012; Muhlbauer et al., 2018; Radtke et al.; 2016; van Mens-Verhulst et al., 2013), internal family systems (Schwartz, 2020; Earley, 2012; Weiss, 2016;); and brain music therapy (Mindlin et al., 2020).

Depth Psychology

Depth psychology is a therapeutic approach based on the extensive work of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung and is concerned with the "essential mystery" (Hollis, 2020, p. 27) of human existence. Hollis (2020) is an American Jungian analyst who states that depth psychology believes that the essential mystery of humanity cannot be explored directly, but must be observed in the various manifestations of the subconscious that emerge in dreams, subtle behaviour patterns, and troubling symptoms that are "the expression of the suffering of the soul" (p. 27). Furthermore, Hollis emphasizes that depth psychology holds that psychological afflictions such as depression, anxiety disorders, and addiction are natural expressions of the mind, notifying individuals that the soul is protesting the choices they are making in life. Questions that might be asked in a depth psychology session include exploration about why a symptom may have shown up at this time, and what would have to happen in the client's life to make it go away. The answer to these questions, according to Hollis, requires the consideration that meeting the expectations of others may very well be sacrificing meaning in one's own life. This realization may require a significant personal transformation in which values, goals, and behaviour are

aligned. Furthermore, the author states that depth psychology understands that what the soul is suggesting is often challenging and threatening to one's sense of security, but that finding the courage to confront the challenge is where true meaning in life is found.

Additionally, Hollis (2020) states that depth psychology is concerned with formative experiences but does not dwell in the past. Instead it simply recognizes that the internalizations and defenses related to past experiences often control life in the present until the opportunity for a larger life comes into consciousness. Questions that can facilitate this exploration examine whether the voices that direct one's behaviour are those of the family, the culture, or the soul. Hollis explains that this work is done primarily through dialogue, journaling, exploration of dreams, and the study of literature—work that holds the power to connect individuals to "a deeper sense of personal authority" (p. 29).

Therefore, it seems that the work of depth psychology is very well suited to the goal of the Third Age Project to support women on their quest for meaningful lives that requires the identification of personal values that may have been buried beneath cultural pressures and expectations.

Existential Therapy

Concerns about meaning and mortality can evoke anxiety and even profound psychopathology. Existential therapy specifically addresses these concerns that relate to human existence and seeks to diminish the distress associated with them (Cooper, 2016).

According to Cooper (2016), existential therapy is informed by the existential philosophers of the 20th century, and rooted in the following philosophical assumptions: human beings have a deep desire for meaning and purpose, human beings function most effectively when they take responsibility for their lives, human beings will face inevitable challenges but

function best when they confront these challenges, human life encompasses both positive and negative experiences, and human experiences are connected to the experience of others and to the outside world.

Furthermore, Cooper (2016) emphasizes that existential therapy adheres to these philosophical assumptions instead of a system of guidelines, which gives existential therapists room for creativity in their work with clients. Perhaps an example of this is how Yalom (2013) often asks his clients what they would like to see written on their epitaph as a way of accelerating the process of identifying personal values, believing that "confrontation with mortality awakens us to the brevity of the preciousness of existence" (p. 212). Existential therapy, according to Cooper (2016), also attends to the anxiety that is often associated with the fear of taking responsibility for one's own life. Existential therapists attempt to help people confront and accept this responsibility, believing that mastering this task will result in a life that is meaningful, fulfilling, and authentic. The author emphasizes that when individuals hide from their freedom to choose how life should be lived, psychological distress is the inevitable result. Additionally, Yalom (2013) explains that creating meaning in life also holds the power to calm the existential fears related to death and isolation.

Langle et al. (2004) state that individuals must not only recognize that which is important but must also recognize that which is not. The authors state that this requires engagement with deep emotions that provide strong clues as to whether behaviour is aligned with values. Langle et al. (2004) refer to this as "inner consent—the inwardly felt or spoken 'yes'" (p. 30). The authors further explain that inner consent allows individuals to stand alone in their uniqueness and successfully meet the demands of a situation, and that this consent generates feelings of meaningfulness and fulfillment.

The overarching idea of existential therapy, according to Diamond (2018), is that "Life's most daunting difficulties, conundrums, and tragedies can never be fully resolved, but merely courageously and consciously faced, accepted, suffered, and sometimes meaningfully transcended" (p. 49).

Therefore, it seems that existential therapy is also very well suited to the goal of the Third Age Project, in that it can help people accept responsibility for their lives and transcend challenges by finding meaning in the struggles of life.

Internal Family Systems

Internal family systems (IFS) was developed in the 1990s by family therapist Richard Schwartz and views the mind as a system that has many parts (Schwartz, 2020), all relating to one another much in the same way that members of a family might relate to one another. In his recent book, *Internal Family Systems*, Schwartz (2020) contends that, in response to life circumstances, certain parts will become dominant in an effort to protect individuals from emotional pain, but in doing so will begin "running the show" and inadvertently keeping individuals stuck and separated from personal values. Schwartz (2020) states that the human mind often has many parts interacting with each other at any given time, but identifies three main categories: Managers that proactively keep people functional and distracted from vulnerable feelings; Firefighters, that reactively tamp down feelings, often with addictive behaviours; and Exiles, often young parts that hold locked-away feelings that the protector parts desperately do not want released into the system. In addition, parts are often polarized, each protecting the system in a completely different way, and these polarizations manifest as inner conflict that can keep the client stuck.

According to Schwartz (2010), the primary techniques used in IFS therapy are: introducing clients to the language of parts and normalizing this way of viewing the mind, asking questions to help clients identify and differentiate from their parts, to determine which parts may be running the client's life, to discover the role of a part, and to help the client become curious about her parts. Weiss (2016) recommends therapeutic questions that individuals can ask themselves in an effort to identify and get to know their own parts. The individual is asked to separate from the targeted part and ask it questions in relation to its role in the psychic system: what would need to happen for it to stop doing its job, and what fear might be driving it to do this job. Furthermore, Earley (2012) states that therapists can help clients identify polarizing parts and facilitate cooperation and understanding between parts and resolution of the inner conflict.

IFS posits that the path to wellness is helping clients to emancipate exiled feelings, which will in turn allow the protective parts to relax and the system to return to balance. Once the system is rebalanced, the Self (which Schwartz spells with a capital S), described as "the wise seat of consciousness" (Schwartz, 2020, p. 9), will take its rightful place as the leader of the psychic system, and the individual will experience the eight C's associated with the Self— calmness, clarity, confidence, connection, compassion, creativity, courage, and curiosity. (Schwartz, 2020).

Therefore, it seems that internal family systems is also well suited to the goal of the Third Age Project in that it holds the potential for the client to bring forth the Self, and the characteristics associated with a Self-led system that can quite possibly help the client take the required steps to move toward a meaningful life.

Feminist Therapy

Feminist therapy, according to Brown (2018), emerged in the 1960s in response to the sexism that was rampant in the field of psychotherapy at that time. Hill and Ballou (1998) state that feminist therapy is grounded in the following five principles: valuing the experience of women; recognizing sociocultural factors that separate women from personal values and cause distress; attending to power in the therapy relationship with the goal of developing equality and ensuring that power dynamics in the client's life are not being replicated in therapy; offering an integrated analysis of oppression, which means that, in addition to gender, therapists attend to other areas of marginalization such as race and sexual orientation; and aiming for social change, which is the ultimate goal of feminist therapy. The authors note that the feminist lens can be easily incorporated into other therapeutic approaches but, at its core, feminist therapy is driven by values and not by technique. However, Hill and Barlou (1998) note that feminist therapy is not simply traditional therapy with the addition of gender awareness but has unique features such as recommending feminist literature and providing information that demystifies the therapeutic process. Israeli & Santor (2000) point to other unique features of feminist therapy that include self-disclosure, where the therapist will disclose personal experiences of oppression if they are deemed to be helpful to the client; reframing of experiences by helping the client see experiences through a feminist lens and recognize the powerful systemic forces at play; gender role analysis where the client's level of psychological distress and way of coping is evaluated in relation to the roles she is assuming in her life; and resocialization techniques, which involves helping the client challenge old beliefs and create beliefs that are more empowering.

Brown (2018) states that feminist therapists believe that women will resist the problem of powerlessness in whatever way is available to them. The author notes that, although the distress

associated with the inequalities of the patriarchal culture are a normal response to oppression, the resistance strategies can often become pathological and damaging. Furthermore, Brown states that, when resistance strategies take the form of behaviours that are positively reinforced in the culture, such as working hard, they can soon amplify and cause problems in all aspects of life. The feminist therapist, therefore, attends closely to the ways in which clients have developed strategies of resistance and explores with them how these strategies may be harming them. Brown points out that the therapist will help the client consider whether the strategies are still needed and contemplate ways in which the individual might live a more meaningful life if she was to let them go and connect to her true values.

Radtke et al. (2016) state that, with the emergence of the Third Age, it is important that feminist therapists attend to new discourses that are emerging about older women, and the confusion that is associated with the often-conflicting identities that are available to them. Van Mens-Verhulst and Radtke (2013) emphasize the personal agency of baby boomer women in attempting to disrupt the societal discourses of aging and select new more empowering identities. However, Radtke et al. (2016) also note that the work of consolidating identity for this cohort of older women is complex and requires considerable personal reflection on the part of the client, and considerable understanding on the part of the therapist.

Therefore, it seems that feminist therapy is well suited to the goal of the Third Age Project in that the feminist lens can be incorporated into the other therapeutic work, but also stand on its own and maintain focus on the experience of baby boomer women in the Third Age and the ways they can navigate the barriers to creating meaningful lives.

Brain Music Therapy

Dr. Galina Mindlin is an American neuropsychiatrist and the founder of brain music therapy in the United States, a music therapy approach based in neuroscience research that was developed in the 1990s at the Moscow Medical Academy (Mindlin et al., 2020). Mindlin and her co-authors explain that there is a great deal of new scientific research in the areas of medicine, neuroscience, and psychology, to support the profound influence of music on the psychological system. They state that advances in neuroimaging technology show that music affects every part of the brain, and can be used to direct our thought processes, including perceptions, emotions, and behaviour. They advocate the creation of playlists for the purpose of deliberately achieving mental states that can help individuals in a variety of ways, such as increasing alertness, improving mood, processing feelings, and relieving anxiety. Additionally, Mindlin et al. (2020) state that music can be used to deliberately facilitate, prolong, and enhance flow experiences, which have an important connection to meaning.

The term flow, or optimal experience, was coined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) to describe the phenomenon of being engaged in an activity where the mind is fully present, time seems to disappear, and work is almost effortless. Since the concept was first introduced, it has been studied by a number of scholars (Pelet et al., 2016; Bonaniuto et al., 2016; Mindlin et al, 2020) who have endorsed its significance and relevance. The author explains that a flow experience requires that the task involves a degree of skill, is goal-oriented, and results in a sense of mastery. However, Csikszentmihalyi notes that when the pleasure of flow is derived from random experiences that are not linked in a meaningful way, the individual will lack a sense of cohesion and life may feel chaotic. On the other hand, Csikszentmihalyi explains that it is possible to create a meaningful life that is a continuous flow experience and is characterized by a

"life theme" (p. 221). He states that this can be achieved by establishing a challenging goal from which all smaller goals and behavior logically derives. Once the primary goal is established, the individual must work to develop the skills that align with the goal, which will result in the various parts of life fitting together in a cohesive way. The author points to Mother Teresa as an example of someone who had a life theme in that she engaged in many activities, but everything she did was connected to the overarching goal of providing for the poor of India. Csikszentmihalyi explains that individuals therefore should pay attention to flow experiences because they provide important clues as to what brings meaning and purpose to one's life, and which skills should be developed. He warns that without attention to the experience of flow, that individuals can inadvertently develop a life theme that is in service to a script written by others, which will result in profound psychological distress. Furthermore, he explains that older people often have a large repertoire of skilled activities, some of which have been set aside for much of life. He states that the identification and development of the skills that facilitate flow can take an individual through to the end of life in a state of meaning, peace and inner harmony.

Another important aspect of brain music therapy is related to the power of music to deliberately help individuals facilitate a sense of psychic balance, organized thinking, and greater clarity in their lives. The author states that when the rhythms of music are combined with imagery and meaningful reflection of lyrics, it is possible to drive the complex systems of the brain in a way that can bring clarity in relation to solving life's problems. Mindlin et al. explain that the brain is composed of "numerous small electrical generators" (p. 75), and that the complex coordinated efforts of these generators can be significantly influenced by music. They state that certain rhythms hold the potential to change the dynamics in the brain and the individual instantly becomes more focused and clear. Furthermore, if the listener is able to

extract personal meaning from the lyrics of a song and connect that meaning to her own life, it can "spark an epiphany" (p. 75), help people get unstuck, and become clear about personal values.

Mindlin et al. (2020) state that the following sequence of events, in the creation of a purposeful playlist, can be a worthwhile endeavor in helping individuals facilitate this organization in the brain. She explains that the listener should first choose a singer whose tone of voice is pleasing to her and makes her want to listen. The next step is listening in a way that allows the feeling of the song to emerge, and the listener can consider what her perspective or feeling might be in a similar situation. Next, the listener attends to the meaning that the singer might be attaching to the song, which allows her to experience the song through the mind of the singer. Upon reflection, the listener can then determine her own thinking, feeling, and meaning, which then leaves her with another perspective to consider in addition to that of the singer. Mindlin et al. (2020) notes that when individuals listen to a piece of music they are actually in the mind of the composer, and that this access to the composer's mind can be beneficial in figuring out aspects of the listener's own life. The authors state that this works because the human brain is naturally wired for empathy which plays a significant role in the way humans can connect to the experience of others. They explain that when individuals take their own understandings and bring them to bear on the experience of others, there emerges an even deeper understanding and clarity about what might be right for them in our own lives.

Therefore, it seems that brain music therapy is also well suited to the work of the Third Age Project because of the potential it holds to enhance clarity, deepen understanding of the self, and evoke the experience of flow, all of which hold the possibility of facilitating the creation of a meaningful life.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 2 has delved into the scholarly literature related to five primary areas—meaning in life, meaning and the Third Age; meaning, COVID-19, and the Third Age; women, identity, and meaning in The Third Age; and the therapeutic approaches that seem well-suited to supporting Third Age baby boomer women in the creation of meaningful lives.

Firstly, the Third Age was explored in terms of the social discourse that accompanies it related to freedom, possibility, and productivity (Laslett, 1990). Secondly, the challenges of the Third Age were also examined, and it was concluded that the Third Age exists as a paradox in that it offers possibilities as well as obstacles to personal fulfillment (Barnes, 2011). Thirdly, the concept of meaning was surveyed with respect to the primary domains as well as the many benefits. Fourthly, meaning was considered in the context of the Third Age, especially as it relates to existential concerns associated with this time in life (Palmer, 2019), and the potential for transforming struggle into personal growth (Yalom, 2013). The literature indicates that the creation of a meaningful life is the ideal buffer for the challenges associated with this time of life (Yalom, 2013). Fifthly, meaning was appraised with respect to baby boomer women in the Third Age, with special attention to persistent systemic discourses that can often separate women from their personal values, and meaningful lives (Radtke et al., 2016). Lastly, a number of therapeutic approaches and ideas were explored: depth analysis (Hollis, 2018), existential therapy (Cooper, 2016; Yalom, 2013), internal family systems (Schwartz, 2020), feminist therapy (Brown, 2018), and brain music therapy (Mindlin et al., 2020), each seeming to offer a somewhat different portal to the identification of personal values and the construction of a meaningful life. The literature review clearly points to the necessity of aligning personal values, goals, and behaviour in the

creation of a meaningful life, a task that can be challenging for baby boomer women in the Third

Age owing to double marginalization at the intersection of age and gender.

   Chapter 3 will combine aspects of each of these therapeutic approaches and incorporate

them into The Third Age Project—a form of therapy designed to support Third Age baby

boomer women on the journey to meaningful lives.

Chapter 3: Summary, Recommendation, and Conclusions

Summary

The literature review suggests that it is quite likely that baby boomer women in the Third Age of life will have a deep desire to live meaningful lives. This desire will possibly be rooted in the ideals of the Third Age (Laslett, 1989), the increased sense of urgency to create meaning as people age (Yalom, 2013), and the expectation of personal freedom for this cohort of women in which the second wave of feminism was the backdrop of their formative years (Muhlbauer et al., 2018). Furthermore, research suggests that Oprah Winfrey's message of female empowerment in the pursuit of meaningful lives (Harris & Watson, 2007) may have left its mark on this generation of women.

However, this cohort of women also must navigate the pressures of a culture that doubly marginalizes them in the areas of age and gender (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012), and often separates them from their personal values and thus, meaningful lives. Furthermore, these persistent marginalizing discourses exist alongside emerging and more empowering ones, which results in conflicting available identities and confusion about how this stage of life should be lived (Muhlbauer et al., 2018). Since identity is the foundation of meaning (Bardgill, 2018), it holds that this confusion is likely a significant barrier for Third Age baby boomer women seeking to live meaningful lives.

Furthermore, meaning in life is a fundamental human need (Bargdill et al., 2018) and if this need is not met, emotional distress, and perhaps even psychological devastation, will follow (Senkovich, 2016). Therefore, it is very possible that many in this large cohort of women will seek psychotherapy in an effort to ease this existential distress, and therapists should be ready to meet this need. Additionally, since the creation of a meaningful life requires deep reflection to

identify personal values (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), it stands to reason that therapists working

with this cohort of women would be wise to engage with therapeutic approaches that attend to

this kind of deep reflective work.

Recommendations

The aim of the therapeutic approach I am proposing, The Third Age Project, is to

facilitate deep personal reflection with the goal of helping Third Age baby boomer women create

meaningful lives that are aligned with their personal values. The Third Age Project derives from

concepts embedded in therapeutic approaches that encourage this kind of deep reflection and

attend to the identification of personal values, incorporating a set of ideas and reflections

outlined in the book *Living an Examined Life* by James Hollis (2018). The project gives special

attention to the societal barriers that constrain women from living in accordance with their

values, and the ways in which these constraints might be navigated and resisted in order for the

goal of living a meaningful life to be realized.

The Third Age Project Document (TAP DOC)

The TAP DOC is the document that will guide clients on the Third Age Project. It will

begin with an overview of the framework of the Project, followed by a basic description of the

approaches that are incorporated into the project, and end with a week-by-week guide which will

include the chapter to be read and the reflection questions that relate to the theme for each week.

The guide for week 1 and week 21 is included here, while the framework and themes for week 2-

20 are shown in Figure 1 in Appendix A.

Framework

The Third Age Project is a 21-week therapeutic journey for baby boomer women in the

Third Age who are seeking meaningful lives, and perhaps feeling that life is either going terribly

wrong, or not feeling quite right. The project draws from a number of therapeutic approaches: Jungian depth psychology (Hollis, 2018), existential therapy (Cooper, 2016; Yalom, 2013; Langle, 2003; Diamond, 2018), feminist therapy (Brown, 2018; Hill & Ballou, 1998; Israeli & Santou, 2010; Radtke, 2016), internal family systems therapy (Schwartz, 2020; Weiss, 2016), and brain music therapy (Mindlin et al., 2020). Each of these approaches encourages deep personal reflection (Schwartz, 2020; Yalom, 2013; Brown, 2018; Radtke et al., 2016; Mindlin et al., 2020) with the overarching goal of achieving the inner peace that comes with living a meaningful life that is aligned with personal values.

The Third Age Project will require clients to engage in five activities over the course of the program: reading, reflecting, journaling, music-listening, and psychotherapy. On day one of each week, they will read one chapter of the book entitled *Living an Examined Life*, by James Hollis (2018). On days 2 to 6, they will journal in response to reflection questions posed in relation to the topic of the chapter for that week. Each question will be derived from one of the therapeutic models that are embedded in the project. Additionally, at some point each week, clients will choose a song they feel resonates with them and deepens their connection to emotions, values, insights, motivation, or some other aspect of the therapeutic work. This song will be added to the client's Third Age Project playlist which will serve as a musical document of their therapeutic journey. Finally, on day 7 of each week, clients will have a therapy session where they will have an opportunity to further explore the reflective work of the week, in which the same therapeutic framework will be employed. It will be recommended that clients set aside one hour per day for this important work, with day one being dedicated to reading the chapter and perhaps highlighting and making notes about what resonates with them, day 2 to day 6 being

dedicated to journaling in response to the reflection questions, and day 7 being dedicated to the

therapy session.

The materials required are: James Hollis' (2018) book, *Living an Examined Life* in either

hard copy or digital format; a journal, either hard copy or digital; and this TAP DOC which will

be free for download on my website. It will be recommended that the weekly therapy sessions be

booked in advance of starting the project so they can be scheduled for the last day of each week

to allow for exploration of the entire week's therapeutic work.

Description of Therapeutic Approaches

Jungian depth psychology is the basis of Hollis' (2018) book, *Living an Examined Life*,

and forms the framework for the Third Age Project. Each chapter asks the reader to consider

ideas that facilitate a deeper exploration of that which might be coming to consciousness by

various means, such as physical symptoms, psychological distress, dreams, or the sense that

something is not quite right. The approach posits that paying attention to these signals from the

soul will lead people to a larger more meaningful life in which their activities of daily living are

aligned with their most cherished values (Hollis, 2018). Hollis (2020) explains that journaling is

one important way of attending to the psyche and interpreting the messages that are often coming

to consciousness in subtle ways.

Internal family systems (Schwartz, 2020) draws from Jungian theory, and views the

human psyche as being composed of many aspects, sub-personalities, or parts. When the psychic

system is in balance, the Self, which is the calm center of consciousness, is in charge and parts

can be deliberately brought forth to help us in our lives. However, sometimes a part will become

dominant and take over the psychic system in an effort to protect us from painful feelings and

keep them locked away. These protective parts all have good intentions for us but often end up

keeping us stuck and separated from our values and meaningful lives. The path to wellness is to get to know our parts and emancipate the distressing feelings that the protective parts are trying to keep locked away. Only then will there be a sense of balance, and the Self can emerge as the leader of the psychic system and connect us to our values and a meaningful life. (Schwartz, 2020).

Existential therapy is concerned with helping people create meaningful lives in an effort to calm the existential fears of death, isolation, responsibility, and meaninglessness, all of which tend to intensify as we age (Yalom, 2013). This form of therapy seeks to help people confront the responsibility they have for their own lives, accept the anxiety that comes with being human, and facilitate the identification of values and the creation of meaning that can serve to calm all existential fear. (Frankl, 1985).

Feminist therapy is an approach that values the experience of women and attends specifically to the ways in which women may become separated from their personal values by the often-invisible pressures of a patriarchal culture (Brown, 2018). This therapeutic approach creates space for the exploration of the societal constraints that can make a meaningful life elusive for many women, and the ways these constraints can be resisted and navigated (Hill & Ballou, 1998). The Third Age Project engages with feminist therapy specifically with regard to the experience of baby boomer women in the Third age of life and examines how current societal discourses related to female aging may be impacting them in their lives.

Finally, brain music therapy is based on current research in the area of neuroscience. It posits that music holds the power to help us deliberately access mental clarity in our efforts to solve life's problems (Mindlin et al., 2020). The Third Age Project will engage with brain music

therapy for the purpose of using music to enhance clarity related to personal values, managing barriers, and creating meaning.

Therefore, each therapeutic approach that informs The Third Age Project holds the potential to facilitate the identification of personal values that can then be aligned with goals and behaviour in the creation of a meaningful life. Each approach takes a somewhat different route in service to this goal. This varied way of posing questions is intended to maximize the possibility of each individual finding a portal to meaning that illuminates her own unique path on this Third Age journey.

Description of Week One:

The TAP DOC will suggest that clients choose a start day, and read chapter 1, "The Choice is Yours" (p. 8) of *Living an Examined Life* (Hollis, 2018). This chapter will form the theme for the reflection questions in this first week of the project.

On days 2-6, the clients will set aside one hour a day to reflect on the questions posed for this first week: What choices have I made for the purpose of fitting in or being accepted by others? (Hollis, 2018); Do the activities I spend most of my time doing make me larger or keep me small? (Hollis, 2018); What might my physical or psychological distress be trying to tell me about what needs to change in my life? (Hollis, 2018); Does my current way of living make sense to me? (Hollis, 2018); As a baby boomer woman, what are some of the possibilities that are available to me in my post-retirement years? (Radtke et al., 2018); What regrets might I have at the end of life if I do not take responsibility for my life now? (Yalom, 2013); What part of my personality might be "running the show" of my life and how might it be keeping me separated from the life I desire? (Schwartz, 2020); What song resonates with me and amplifies the insights,

emotions, or other psychological work I have done this week? (Mindlin et al., 2020); What would I like to explore further in my therapy session this week?

On day 7, the client will have a therapy session where the reflective work of the week will be reviewed, and the client will have an opportunity to explore feelings, insights, goals, values, obstacles, and any other aspect of the work that she desires. The therapeutic models that form the framework of the Third Age Project will be used in sessions as well as in the formulation of the reflective questions. Feminist philosophy will be very prevalent in the therapeutic work of creating meaning and will be targeted specifically at the available identities of baby boomer women in the Third Age.

Description of Week Twenty-One

For the final week of The Third Age Project, the TAP DOC will ask clients to read the final chapter, "Live the Examined Life: Live the Questions, Not the Answers" (p. 80), of *Living an Examined Life* (Hollis, 2018). This chapter will form the theme for the questions that will be posed for this final week.

On days 2-6, clients will be asked to set aside one hour a day to reflect on the following reflection questions: What really matters to me (Hollis, 2018)? How am I being called to live my life (Hollis, 2018)? How can I continue this reflective journey in order to ensure that I am not living a life prescribed by others (Hollis, 2018)? How can I be comfortable with uncertainty so I can continue to ask myself what needs to change in service to my values (Hollis, 2018)? How will I continue to attend to the power dynamics that show up in my life and ensure that my voice is heard by me and by others (Radtke et al., 2016)? How is my authentic Self showing up in my life at this time? What Self characteristics am I experiencing—calmness, clarity, curiosity, compassion, confidence, courage, creativity, connection (Schwartz, 2020)?

What personal values have emerged over the course of these 21 weeks that had been previously unknown to me (Yalom, 2013; Schwarz, 2020; Hollis, 2018)? What goals would be a reflection of these values (Bargdill et al., 2019)? What behaviours should I embrace in service to these values, and what behaviours should I shed (Bargdill et al., 2018)? What final song should I choose to complete my TAP playlist that reflects the overall experience of The Third Age Project (Mindlin et al., 2020)? What would I like to bring forth in my final therapy session?

On day 7 of this last week of the Third Age Project, clients will have their final therapy session where space will be created for the purpose of consolidating the work of the project. Special attention will be given to the identification of personal values, as well as goals and behaviour that will align with those values, all in the context of being a baby boomer woman in the Third Age of life. Clients will be encouraged to continue the reflective work in whatever way they feel will be helpful, and ongoing therapy will be offered if they wish to continue the therapeutic work beyond the project.

Limitations

There is considerable cultural interest in baby boomer women now in the Third Age of life, but very little is actually known about how they are creating meaning and making sense of the process of aging (Muhlbauer et al., 2018). As with previous stages of life, according to Muhlbauer et al. (2018), baby boomer women are charting new territory and redefining what it means to be a woman in the Third Age. However, van-Mens Verhulst and Radtke (2013) point out that baby boomer women may want to age in a way that the research has yet to discover. This point is echoed by Muhlbauer et al. (2018) who state, "undeniably, there is a need to further study this age group of older women to understand the aging process as they experience it" (p. 514).

I would be interested in research that looks at the way in which baby boomer women in the Third Age of life might find the balance between attending to responsibilities that fall to them, while also honouring their own personal journeys to authenticity and meaning. It would require that the research explore this added element of complexity with regard to constructing identity at this stage of life. It is my sense that many baby boomer women might find it easier to engage with the summons of the soul if there was a way to simultaneously attend to their responsibilities, even if those responsibilities are secondary to cultural expectations. In the context of a life, these responsibilities will likely be linked to deep emotion, such as caring for a loved one. Therefore, it seems that inattention to this potential aspect of a Third Age baby boomer woman's life could be a significant barrier to heeding the call of the soul.

Therefore, therapists are left to deal with this paucity of research while baby boomer women grapple with the conflicting discourses that the culture presents. As a therapist, I will choose to use sound therapeutic concepts to connect to the wisdom of these women themselves, with the goal of helping them discover that which their souls are guiding them to do, and then to find the courage to actually do it.

Conclusion

The conclusion that emerges from this capstone project is that therapists need to be aware that when Third Age baby boomer women present in therapy with psychological distress, the distress could very well be rooted in the existential concern of meaninglessness (Bargdill et al., 2019; Hollis, 2018; Radtke, 2016; Senkovich, 2016; Yalom, 2013). Therefore, therapists who are seeing clients in this demographic group should have an understanding of the potentially devastating consequences of a life devoid of meaning, especially for older women who may feel trapped in roles not of their choosing (Radtke, 2016; Senkovich, 2016). The Third Age Project,

which will be made available to the therapeutic community, is a way for therapists to be prepared

to engage in this important therapeutic work.

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Appendix A

TAP DOC Themes for Weeks 2-20

Figure 1. Hollis Book Chapters and Reflection Themes for Weeks 2-20 of TAP

Note: Reprinted from *Living an examined life: Wisdom for the second half of the journey*, by J.

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