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Planning for the Future**

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How to cite

Carrera L. (2014). Elderly Women. Between Risks of Loneliness and Planning for the Future.
[Italian Sociological Review, 4 (3), 341-364]

Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v4i3.89>

[DOI: 10.13136/isr.v4i3.89]

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3. Accepted for publication

March 2014

Additional information about

Italian Sociological Review

can be found at:

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Elderly Women. Between Risk of Loneliness and Planning for the Future

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Abstract

The Italian population, in line with what is happening in other Western countries, is becoming increasingly older and older. In addition to the proportion of older people, the significance of being elderly has substantially changed as it is no longer regarded as a mere residual step in adult life, but a real phase of opportunities and possibilities, though also of limitations and difficulties.

It is precisely this sort of growing fluidity that this essay will focus on by trying to reflect on what the variables are that can influence or determine the very different outcomes and situation of the elderly.

The phenomenon of the "third age" is extremely complex and at times even contradictory. In order to investigate this changeable and varied scenario a qualitative investigation was carried out using semi-structured interviews in various towns and cities of Apulia in order to understand the relationship between the perception that older people have of themselves and the characteristics of their daily lives.

Keywords: Elderly women, daily life, welfare

1. The background

The Italian population, in line with what is happening in other Western countries, is becoming increasingly older and older. Thanks to improved living conditions and discoveries in medicine, life expectancy has risen and, as a consequence the taxes resulting from this are also increasing steadily. This has been highlighted by the data from Istat relating to trends in population demographics: the percentage of the population aged 65 has increased by

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more than two percentage points in just ten years reaching 21,2 % in 2013¹. This increasing percentage is the result also of a combined significant decline in the births.

In addition to the proportion of older people, the significance of being elderly has substantially changed as it is no longer regarded as a mere residual step in adult life, but a real phase of opportunities and possibilities, though also of limitations and difficulties. Therefore it is potentially a very diverse state dependent on the specific combination of factors and personal resources of each individual. The phenomenon of "the progressive diversification of that population, both with regard to social, economic, cultural, and health factors" (Baltes and Mayer 1999; Lalive d' Epinay et al., 2000; Cadarec 2001, Gilteard and Higgs 2002) has gradually developed. It is precisely this sort of growing fluidity that this essay will focus on by trying to reflect on what the variables are that can influence or determine the very different outcomes and situation of the elderly.

Firstly, within the label of "the third age" we should begin by distinguishing some better defined time frames. If we speak of the "young elderly" we refer to those in the 65-74 age group, "elders" refers to the 75-84 age group and "old elderly" for those who are more than 85 years of age (Landuzzi 2011). So, old age, or rather the aging process, slowly begins to be identified not as a state but as a process of a "difficult" time of life. These difficulties, however, are not only due to mere biological factors but rather to a condition which has been socially constructed. The theme of the third age has increasingly undergone the beneficial effect of moving away from a purely medical viewpoint to including a discussion of social sciences. It is without doubt that aging, as evidenced by the large range of literature on the subject, is a condition of the progressive deterioration of the health of a body but it is also true that the social conditions within which this process occurs can have a profound effect. For this reason, today we are witnessing a "progressive difficulty in defining at first glance the appearance of the phases of transition. In particular, it is increasingly difficult to correlate them with precise anagraphical bands" (Facchini, Rampazi 2006, 62). Paradoxically, regardless of age, old age can be full of plans and achievements which broaden horizons and give new perspectives on the self but which can also lead to fragmentation, isolation and the loss of self and thus to marginalisation and social exclusion.

As previously noted, there are many factors that can affect this outcome which are all closely linked and interconnected.

¹ ISTAT data, Population, Demographic trends, over time (www.istat.it).

Firstly there is the social representation of old age. This, like any other social phenomenon, has become embedded in the broader pattern of collective social consciousness that defines its meaning and significance. The elderly have taken on the mantle of the final stage in life's journey when things lose their meaning and significance and where life is now "behind them" instead of being a time in which, despite the obvious physical challenges, new opportunities open up as they have a greater availability of time (Operto 2001; Palomba, Misiti, Sabatino (eds.) 2001; Allario 2003). It can be a potentially rich phase of planning and opportunity.

These collective representations play havoc with the second factor under consideration which is the fact that each person has his own perception of old age in general and more specifically his own. This means "another generalisation" (Mead 1934) which contributes deeply to the process of constructing one's own self-image². This representation of identity heavily influences the subject's ability to react to problems and to deal with the inescapable re-socialization which is solicited by this new phase of life.

2. An outline of the image

The phenomenon of the "third age" is extremely complex and at times even contradictory. In order to investigate this changeable and varied scenario a qualitative investigation was carried out using semi-structured³ interviews in various towns and cities of Apulia in order to understand the relationship between the perception that older people have of themselves and the characteristics of their daily lives. This helped to create a sketch of the initial situations, attitudes and behaviours that shape this scenario. The women interviewed were encouraged to talk about their current condition, their social life and possibly their work commitments, and also focused on their social and political views and the reasons given by them to explain their choices.

The survey conducted approximately one hundred interviews between late 2012 and 2013 in Puglia which were almost all audio-recorded. The area is one of the most interesting from the point of view of demographic trends which are well above the national average and even those of the "Mezzogiorno"⁴. In the subsequent evaluation about ten interviews were

² Cfr between Farr, Moscovici and others(1989).

³ The interviews were conducted personally and by Dr. Giuseppina Schiraldi.

⁴ The population over the age 65 of increased between 2002 and 2013, at a national level by 2.5%, by 2,7% in the South and by 3,6% in Puglia. Similar trends are also found in reference to the increase in the average age: Italy 2,1%, Southern Italy 3,2%

excluded as they were not considered appropriate and so the final total which could be transcribed into written documents was ninety-one.

Since this was a qualitative survey these cases are certainly not the result of the construction of a statistically representative sample of women in Puglia and so during the course of the analysis we resorted to the usual distributions of frequency and other statistical calculations. Therefore when we refer to a "sample" it is purely for the purposes of this document. The random selection of respondents was chosen to represent the different ages and diverse towns of the region which therefore allowed the construction of a composite picture of the attitudes and behaviours in relation to the different social realities of our region. The interviews were aimed at older women (65 and over) who are residents in Puglia. In addition, it was decided to further limit the interviewees to only older women who lived alone. Some of the women had never had a partner or others had lost their partner and at the time of the interviews only two of them had grandchildren living with them.

The interviews focused on three themes: everyday life, political views over time as seen from a broader perspective and the "desire for a better life." These choices were aimed at investigating the relationships and plans that characterized the life experiences of these women. The collected material was then processed by analysing the key topics involved which allowed us to construct a typology of four types of women: a) active b) housewives c) not autonomous d) resigned. These different types of women showed vast differences in lifestyles and the quality of their relationships, their levels of social and political engagement and the comparison of their "desire" to improve their lives.

2.1 Daily life

Looking at the daily activities of these women shows clear differences.

a) The *active* are women who have a busy day which starts in the early morning and often continues with the same intensity until the evening. They are women who, despite their advanced age⁵, are strongly integrated into their neighbourhood and are engaged in numerous social activities which, as we shall see in the next section, are sometimes political. Some of them are still

and Apulia 3,4% and the increase of the aging index (Italy 19,7 points, Southern Italy 33,1 points, Apulia 38,9 points).

⁵ As we will discuss more in the conclusion, the subjects do not show any significant "generational effect" in the sense of that belonging to a certain age group does not appear to affect the pattern of daily life adopted.

very much occupied with work activities that, although they "in the black" and are irregular, occupy a large part of their day. Others are strongly involved in caring for other older people. Almost all of them talk about their decision to attend training courses both at public facilities such as the University of the Third Age or at private centres in their towns and cities of residence which offer a wide range of opportunities⁶.

- I have very busy days! Sometimes my daughter, who lives in Milan, says that I have to be quiet, that I don't bite off more than I can chew! She's afraid that I'm tired, but I answer that I like have a lot of things to do. I *work* in my church and in my association, I can't stop, there are too much things to do! in the evening I go to the University of the Third Age, there I meet friends, and we discuss, we talk about some problems of our town and what we have to do to resolve them. After we follow our courses. Later I go in the church for my chorus, two hours more or less. Later I encounter other friends and we play chess or play cards as long we can (n.6, 66 years);

- I go in my little farm still with my bicycle. I go there, I cultivate my vegetables, today, I did picked "cicorielle". I live alone, and I do my housework by myself, after I cook, watch tv, and then, in the afternoon I go to the elderly association and I play cards with friends. We organize parties, wine festivals, we talk about a lot of things, we discuss. It's very important to socialize with others. I participated in a theatrical representation. Nobody have to be alone! (n.9, 74 years);

- There are many associations in my city, and you can really choose between so many possibilities, so you are never alone at home (...) Then there is the University of the Third Age, I have entered some years ago. At the beginning I was painting, I took so much time. I liked it so much, I like to have the brain always in movement, (...) For example, during the lesson of bigotry, when they are making the necklaces, my mind goes beyond and immediately I think to recover something to combine, in a way other than what I saw. I repeat, I always think of creating, to keep the brain in motion. The things I do, keep me always in movement (n. 83, 74 years).

It is useful to isolate some of the testimonies of a very interesting number of older women of this first type. They are women who refuse to let their "afflictions or failing health" stop them. They actively seek out and find

⁶ In this and in subsequent interviews the name of the towns where the subjects lived were intentionally omitted bearing in mind that the declaration of the absence of structured opportunities to meet and centres may not be real but only perceived as such by the subjects themselves.

opportunities to socialise within their neighbourhood and are active participants in its life. They also show capable planning skills.

- I'm a woman too busy, I make long walks, help those who need it, I do the syringes to the sick friends. In my house I do my housework by myself, later, if I can, I work with crochet, I read the bible, I do my prayers, and so on. I wake up at seven, I washed myself, I dress, and then I begin with my visit to my friends who are ill. If they need the aid, I go to go grocery shopping. Then I'm back home to prepare for cooking (...). In the afternoon if I have to go to make a few visits I do them, or I do some chore-work, how to shorten the trousers to some friend, tighten a skirt. But above all I go to the Center, and there they give me the things to do and also I often suggest projects. In my town there is so much to do for families! The Center helps me to stay not alone (n.1, 83 years);

- Every day is different by every other! Otherwise it would be very boring. (...) The location of my house is strategic and it allows me to go everywhere I want to talk with my friends. At the University of the Third Age, I chose medicine, I do "Think at comparison", that is, where you converse and express your ideas against someone else. I study ancient history and I do burraco tourney (card game), because we also want a little fun" (n.32, 80 years);

- I wake up and I prepare milk, I eat and later arrives my "badante" [helper]. I listen to the music, the opera, I do gardening and I watch TV. This makes me feel good! I feel very good. I prepare lunch, then I put order in the kitchen. Sometimes I prepare the home-made pasta, biscuits and I give them to the priest or to his mother. In the afternoon I go out every day. (...) All afternoons, I come to the University of the Third Age where I attended religion, poetry, dialect. I have also lesson of gymnastics. I put on my suit and I do gymnastics. I have as friends the Sisters who live near my house and they often come in my home or we go to find the elderly at the elderly center of Those poor elderly really need of people who care about them and we want to be of help. Sometimes I give them cookies (n.78, 85 years);

b) A high level of occupation also characterises the life of the *housewives* which almost puts them in a subcategory of the active women. Housewives, however focus their daily activities and social life within their home and family which makes it appropriate to separate the two types. They too are women who are still in direct control of their homes and often take care of their grandchildren so as to allow daughters and daughters-in-law to pursue employment outside the home. They are faced with a kind of domesticity activity but one which exposes them to a high risk of isolation.

- I wake up early. I have breakfast. After I prepare my lunch. I read a lot, I like very much reading. Now I do that little less because I have problems with my eyes. I read all I can understand and I'm interested in everything!. Usually I read newspapers and magazines. My passions are reading and also working. In the

afternoon I work on the crochet when there is something to do. (...) Every afternoon my grandchildren are at my home. My daughter works so, after school, they arrives. On Sunday I'm alone because my daughter and her husband are at home, and they don't need my help for children. I hate Sunday because I stay alone all the day. It's a very long day! (...) I have some friends in the neighborhood but especially in the summer or when it is good time, we walk in the afternoon to spend together two or three hours. But now, where are you going? Age is the one that is. I'm afraid to take a glide (n.38, 89 years);

- I wake up at 6.20 in the morning and I awake my grandchildren that momentarily are with me. I go above and prepared the coffee, my things, and then I put the washing machine, or I'm just going to prepare for lunch, or other types of housework. Then I help my grandchildren, who have a bakery. My life was always busy (...) Then if there is some other commitment to do, I do that. There is still my little farm and I take care of it. If there are some heavy works to do in the farm, I call someone to help me, but I supervise them. Then I return home at about 12.30, I prepare lunch for all. (...) In the evening I remain alone because my grandchildren go out with their friends. When they are not with me I haven't anything to do (n.3, 65 years);

- I still feel good, but I'm always at home. In house, there is always something to do and then I have a lot to do because I'm alone. My daughter is now married and has gone off and I never had many friends. They were friends of my husband, but since when is dead, they are no longer came here (...) I wait for the afternoon when my son goes here my grandchildren. They gives me a lot to do. But this is a blessing! So I'm always busy! (...) In this city everything is far away and it is not easy doing things. Every week I go to the doctor, so at least, I can see someone else! (...) Sometimes I ear about Centers for the elderly, but who knows where they are? I don't know anyone and here there is nothing at all (n.69, 70 years).

c) The *not autonomous* are those women who have been very active in the past and, in some cases still would be if their health permitted. All of them are very old and for most of them their major hindrance is difficulty in walking. Some of them, however, are engaged in outdoor activities, but in a reduced capacity due to the "greater effort" involved in leaving their home to go to other places. Many of them make use of the "A.D.I." system which paradoxically has become a sort of disadvantage because it means that one of the main meeting places, the doctors surgery, is now out of bounds.

- I wake up early and I go back and forth in this prison, [referring to his house], with the turnstile that helps me. I wait for my daughter to bring me something to eat. Sometimes I cook, but it's very difficult because I need the walker to move me. I pay for a woman who helps me, a "badante" [helper], but only for the night. (...) I watch tv until 12 at night, because I cannot sleep. This is my life now! (...) I'm always alone, before they were friends, but now is no longer

anyone. There is someone from the church, some Sister come to see me. When one is so old as me, there is nothing more than this! (...) I don't go out more. Before I went out from those three steps, but now I can't do it more. Before I went out in the garden but now I cannot do anything anymore and there is nothing that interests me. I'm waiting for die (n.5, 91 years);

- My social life before was different, but then my husband died, everything has changed... Now, slowly I am accustomed. I suffer much the solitude. (...) I'm very happy when someone come to my home, but when I am alone... oh my God! (...) Everyone goes fast and has too many things to do. Also my sons have always to do. They come at my home rarely! I have four children, but some days there isn't nobody here. I am enrolled in the elderly Center, but they don't organize anything because they haven't the money from the Municipality, and then nobody go there. So I stay every day at home (n.7, 74 years);

- My business now are decreased, because last year I had a little heavy. I need to be accompanied, and I haven't anyone near to me (...) I go rarely at the Center. They don't organize anything, they treat us like children, or as poor old people! They organize little shows with the clowns ... so I don't go there! (n.11, 70 years).

d) Finally, the *resigned* are women who say they are now tired and resigned and, in fact, "feel the burden of aging". They suffer from loneliness and they only come into contact with their families who are the only people they maintain a social relationship with. Many of them belong to the upper scale of the "young elderly" and dramatically demonstrate the importance, apart from age, state of health and personal independence that a sense of life and a lively spirit have on the quality of their daily life. Among them are those who support some family members (especially children) but spend the rest of their days in an empty and meaningless way. They leave the television on all day as a the only form of company and do not engage in any activities outside the home. They show signs of profound sadness both for the loss of their spouse their absent children and the lack or complete absence of friends and, as a consequence, their lonely lives. In these cases a vicious circle develops where the loss of meaning due to the lack of relationships intensifies as these women are closed within the walls of the home. The contrast should be noted with one of the interviewees who talked about going to another town for her summer holiday which was much lively than her own and which had a direct impact on her lifestyle due to the number of opportunities available.

- I get up but unfortunately when I do I feel a sense of loneliness that really feels like it's killing me inside sometimes. I feel alone and I don't get any pleasure in getting up because there's no-one waiting for me. So I get up a bit sadly, do the shopping, do my chores, it's no kind of life ... I don't think it's a very happy or relaxing life ... Something inside me changed when I became a widow. I'm not

the same joyful person I was before, that's how my life changed in a few words, above all when that happened and then my son Luigi left, he kept me company and I used to think about him coming home and I'd make him something to eat ... my life changed, I sometimes feel this great emptiness inside me, when I'm alone in the evening and when I go to bed is when the feeling of loneliness is worse, inside me. Perhaps if someone comes to visit I shake off my feelings of loneliness and I don't think about it and ... maybe that's when I feel better ... when I have company. If you're always at home you don't have anything to do and you don't feel great, if there's nothing to do outside the home it's like dying! (n.2, 65 years);

- I get up at 7.30 as there's no point in getting up at 6 seeing as I live alone. I get up at 7.30, have breakfast and then, if I need to I do the shopping or if not I stay at home. I don't complain, I put a brave face on it. My sadness is that I'm alone. Who knows! Perhaps my God will help me. Sometimes I feel lost. My son calls me every day and asks how I am. And I say...I'm ok, I'm ok. It's not right to make another person feel down. I suffer a lot from loneliness (...) I don't know what to do all day and it just gets worse (n. 16, 73 years);

- I get up and start the day by taking my tablets, I have a coffee with a bit of milk and do some chores around the house. I wait for midday when I can have lunch and then I prepare my lunch. When I need to go out to go shopping I wait for someone to come and collect me to take me to do the shopping. After my husband died I was depressed and I always stayed at home.....when he died another chapter in my life started.....loneliness. Loneliness is horrible. Then I watch television or I call some friends if I have to. I don't have many friends however as I got married when I was 17 and then I had my first daughter and I always stayed at home. I get up in the morning and boh!, I don't know what to do or who to talk to. You don't even want to go out because you're afraid of falling over and hurting yourself or of bumping into people who might hurt you. I have dinner at about 19.30 in the evening and sometimes I don't even bother to use a plate for the small amount of food that I eat and I don't want to know about anything else ...(...) I'm waiting for the summer because I go to my villa and I have some friends there. When we meet up we go shopping, go for walks and play cards games like burraco in the evening. There's more to do there, they organize things in the square and on the beach and so I go out and spend a few nice evenings and have a chat about lots of things (n. 59, 73 years).

2.2 Participation in politics

In the context of the daily activities and interests of the different groups, it seemed interesting to focus attention on the relationship these women have with politics in the broadest sense of the term. Starting with the different

forms of participation⁷, we tried to investigate what the levels of commitment were of these women in a social and political context. With regards to this last type of commitment, the differences are less marked, although the work activities previously discussed have an effect on the social commitments evident in daily activities.

a) Almost all the *active* women subjects regularly vote. They state that they consider voting to be a right more than a duty and the choice to go to the polls is part of political education. They tend to keep up to date with politics on a daily basis in order to "get a better idea of the parties" and then to choose between the different proposals. Some also talk about a current active participation in union activities and a fair few come from a long history of political and social engagement. For many of these however the choice of voting is linked to a long-held distrust of political parties who they feel do not represent them.

There are only a few exceptions. Among those who continually abstain from voting, some cite this as a means of conscious protest about party politics which has long since ceased to recognise them. It is not the case that they cease to be informed about daily politics as they regularly discuss it with friends and family and are also very active in social work. They therefore try to fill this void left by party politics as they still want the opportunity to express themselves and their desire to participate has never faded. Others display a complete lack of interest which originated with the loss of their husband. And finally others continually abstain from voting apart from for various kinds of "social" referendum.

- I like politics and I always say that if I were younger I would get involved myself, I go on strikes when they happen. My husband was left-wing, my father was left-wing, my father-in-law was left-wing and so naturally I'm left-wing. When I was growing up my father was a farmer and all farmers were obviously communists (n. 8, 72 years);

- Yes, this year I've been involved in a union (.....) We go on strike, in fact on 25th we're going to Bari to help the young people because they really need it. I always vote (n. 10, 73 years);

- I was interested in politics but when fascism collapsed I didn't go to vote anymore but I continued to fight against a dictatorship because my brother said "We've escaped from one dictatorship so let's not get into another one"

⁷ The tripartite division of political participation into traditional, not traditional and invisible allows us to analyse types of political behaviour that do not fit into the classical forms of traditional participation (see Carrera 2010).

with communism". Since I was a child I've consciously fought, fought because I'd read books about the revolution in Russia. And I told other people not to vote for the communists. I've always voted for the person rather than the political party. Honest people who I had a good feeling about, I voted for them (n. 53, 80 years);

- Politics is difficult for those who understand it and those who don't, don't get involved. They don't know how to. I go to vote, I'm interested, I try to understand the different people and what they've done as much as possible because I have to vote. Independently, not based on the color of the party. But it's true that these political parties are all terrible! I try to vote for the best of a bad bunch because I don't want to give up my choice but sometimes I say to myself "And now who should I choose amongst this group of thieves". Last time I voted for Grillo who at least can change some things (n.17, 74 years);

- I think we've arrived at the extremes in terms of politics. Today you can't stick to one party. None of them give you a sense of security. If you go to vote it's because it's correct to do your duty, but you don't vote because you're interested in this party or you vote for that one because it's done that. You only go to be a good Italian citizen and it's correct to go to vote but now I'm not there and so I don't vote. I'm a volunteer in two centers so I'm doing something concrete to help people which they don't do, and now with the crisis the poor people aren't the same ones as before, now the poor are the ones who before gave you money to help others (n. 23, 75 years);

- I haven't voted for many years now. Politics is too dirty nowadays. Then when my husband died I just lost interest, it was him who always used to want to talk about politics (...) I do some real things like going to the association there is here that really helps to deal with people's problems. When one of us goes to the Council the mayor knows that he has to give us money or that we are going to ask him something or to do something as we always do! (n. 44, 75 years).

b) Even the *housewives* regularly go to the polls. However a different political model emerges among these women in which the voting is seen more as a duty we have to do and it is not accompanied by a significant level of interest in or discussion about politics. Many of these women are influenced in the voting-choices by children, in-laws or grandchildren. A high degree of distrust in politics is linked to individual members of political parties. In their words these people "only think of themselves and their own interests ". One of these women even stated that when she went to vote she handed over a blank ballot sheet so as to cancel out her vote. We also find women abstaining from voting amongst the housewives.

- I don't care politics really, I just don't understand! I vote like a parrot that do what someone else say. Political life does not belong to me, I do my duty in

- voting when there are political elections, but I'm not interested at all in politics (n.81, 76 years);
- I put my vote and that's all, I'm not so much interested in politics (n.3, 65 years);
 - I vote and that's it! That's all! However, I do it without any interest ... my son is a politician and says, "Mom you have to put the cross here " and I say "Okay" and I do that (n.73, 79 years);
 - I'm not interested so much in politics. There is my son who is very expert in politics. And I ask him who I should give the vote. I don't care so much about politics because they all are liars. That's all! (n.18, 81 years);
 - I don't vote are from three or four years, since when my husband died, I didn't go to vote. I don't understand politics, and I don't care it (n. 56, 77 years);
 - I'm not interested in politics, I'm not inclined to it. I like to listen to the news. I'm not part of any politics activities. I go usually to the vote, I had voted especially against hunting, I don't want to murder these poor beasts that do nothing for evil. (...) I go to vote against these things, and nothing else (n. 67, 78 years);
 - I don't vote from two or three years ago (n.14, 99 years);
 - I never go to vote, I am not. I am not because they are "filth" and "bastards" (n.4, 78 years);
 - Politicians make me all crap! There isn't an order and, above all, they don't worry about the problems of Italy, they think only of themselves. I go to vote but I will leave my card in white so my vote is canceled. I don't trust politicians (n.30, 78 years).

c) The *not autonomous* women show some degree of autonomy with regards to political behaviour. Some claim that despite the difficulties linked to their health, they regularly vote. Others, however, show signs of a growing lack of interest in politics at times caused by the loss of a husband. Others declare themselves to continually abstain and whose current difficulties are only a consolidation of repeated behaviour.

- I always go to vote, and believe me, it's an odyssey sometimes. But I want voting and I say to my son that or he *brings* me or I call the 118 to do that! (n. 48, 82 years);
- I'm not interested in the politics. Now they all are become the same. No one resolves our problems, Italian problems. Some years ago I have dedicated to syndicate a bit 'of my time, but many years ago. Now I go to vote, but for the rest I can no longer do anything ... Now it's necessary that young people have to do pay attention to their future, as we have fought in our own time, and women most of all! Nobody had gave us nothing! (n.11, 70 years);

- Before I was interested in politics. I eared the discussions of my husband and I went to vote. But when he was dead, I hadn't voted more, because I am not interested and now I fell not good and I can't move easily (n.43, 86 years);
- I have never gone to vote. It's not for me. I was at home, I have always occupied of my children and my husband. My house has always been the most clean of all here. All say that. And this was my life (n.82, 89 years);
- Eh I am not interested in politics now. Now *I have done my time* and now I'm not worry about these things. I have pain all day and I can't move. These are my problems! (n.36, 82 years).

d) The *resigned*, as expected, show the highest number of non-voters. In keeping with their model of everyday life they demonstrate a defeatist attitude towards any kind of social commitment and very little interest in politics. Sometimes they have lost interest in it altogether as a result of the death of their spouse. Those who do vote do so out of a sense of habit or because they feel a need to conform but have no real political agenda. They retain a strong distrust of politicians, who, in the words of these women "are all the same". These stances are accompanied by virtually no levels of social commitment. Except a few cases of volunteering in mainly Catholic organisations. Political and social commitment is another "missed" opportunity for resigned women which contributes to the distancing themselves from any opportunities for an "active" life or external relationships.

- Politics does not interest me and or my children. I just go to vote and that's it. For everything else I just think about myself (n.19, 85 years);
- I have not voted for a long time. I think it's they always decide on pointless things and the people do not matter to them. Before I would speak to my husband about it and get a bit angry but now I just don't think about it. They're not my problems. I 'm always alone at home and sometimes I don't even turn on the television because I don't even want to watch a film to pass the time (n.31, 68 years);
- I don't want to know anything about politics. It's something that has nothing to do with me. I already have too many problems. And then when my husband died I lost interest in the things that were important before, let alone politics. Before it was him who told me "Let's go to vote and vote for the one I recommend you - don't make mistakes". He followed politics a bit and I went with him and just to go for a walk (n.55, 71 years);
- I don't understand politics I just think that we are all equal (n.61, 77 years);
- I'm going to go out and vote but I don't know anything about the rest of politics. I hear a bit from my daughter but my son also doesn't care about it. And anyway it is a thing for the young, I don't come into it any more (n.64, 71 years).

3. Desires for a better life

What has been observed up to now is the extent to which older people are not a homogeneous phenomenon that can be summed up by talking about "the end of the active life" and "the condition of the elderly ". They are, on the contrary, a varied and complex phenomenon in which the image each person has of herself intersects with the chances she has to make new or existing relationships. This heterogeneity takes the shape of different needs and "desires" and also different levels of planning for the future.

a) *Active* are women more dissatisfied with the opportunities the place they live in has to offer. The older ones, especially those with a limited degree of mobility, complain about loneliness and the need to spend more time with others. The younger ones talk about having roads which allow them to get around without the risk of falls, more suitable public transport and traffic wardens who are more willing to help them in case of need. Even more of them further emphasize the need to improve urban transport services (stressing the need for links with supermarkets and shopping centres), the general condition of the roads, the geographical distribution of hospitals and especially cinemas, theatres, shopping centres and associations that offer opportunities for social and cultural enrichment. When they speak about higher pensions they justify the need to have more disposable income in order to be able to meet travel expenses, cultural entertainment and clothes. Many are directly involved in lobbying their local councils to meet at least part of the requirements they deem necessary.

- We should improve everything, especially here there is nothing really. There is nothing in terms of theatres, dance halls, nothing! At our age it would be good. For my part, I'm missing a companion but then I've got my children. I'm get on with others and I go to the countryside (n.9, 74 years);

- This town has nothing. In fact my friends and I have to drive to a town nearby where there are things going on. Apart from pizzerias there is nothing. You can always go to a pizzeria but it would be better if there was a theatre. In the summer you can go for a walk, but there's not much to do (n.12, 75 years);

- My city is big so you need a car to get around and we always have to rely on a friend of ours who has one. If there were convenient buses we would we go around all day as there are so many things to do, but if you don't have a car it is as if there were nothing! (n. 87, 76 years);

- This country is not creative! Except when the tourists come from Bari and there's so few people around you don't see anyone (laughs). Yes we need

some entertainment activities. This year they did not even do a demonstration. Previously it was organized by someone and people came out and cheered up this little town. Otherwise it is a country not dead but this year there wasn't anything while in other years there were at least some events to be organized (n.71, 78 years).

b) Among the *housewives* the requests centre on those aspects more traditionally associated with the elderly: higher pensions to help their children, more efficient hospitals and cheaper medicines. The need for structures on the land and meeting places is significantly less among this group. More than anything else they complain about the need to be able to spend more time with their children who are always work driven and now taken away from their lives.

- In practice, I would like many things to change in my town. To start with the police impose many unnecessary fines. I'm not against animals but against the owners who let them do their business all over the pavements and then do not clean it up Another thing that would help me is if the government were to give me a little bit extra to help me survive as I don't really know how to manage ... I have five children and once one of them said to me "Mum, mum I can't keep up with all the needs of the children "(n.62, 66 years);

- We need to fix the neighborhood starting with the environment. We need to fix the roads, schools are falling to pieces, no-one checks anything or fixes anything. We live in social housing and we have been abandoned. The building needs to be repaired but they don't care. And the walls are falling apart. There is nothing solid. There is a building where you go to report complaints but they don't care. And there's not enough police officers. They don't even have enough petrol for their cars"(n. 15, 73);

- I would like more money because with my pension I struggle to make it to the end of the month. I wish there was a health service that would help me with all the expensive medicines I take. I don't feel old and I don't want to give up. That's all (n.21, 70 years).

c) The *not autonomous* show a further significant decrease in the content of their requests which are all either focused on the need to spend more time with their children or related to healthcare. They include the need for home helps, for assistance with "real medical issues" and also the guarantee of someone to talk to at least for a few hours. Some still emphasize the physical barriers that force them to stay at home or keep them from going to places they would otherwise love to attend. They too stress the shortcomings of the various local councils:

. And what do I want most at this point?! I want to spend more time with my

daughter who is always in a rush and then the medicines that cost so much. Just now my daughter helps me because if I cannot afford to buy them every day. After a life spent working sometimes I feel so ashamed (n. 51, 83 years);

- The money, the money it takes ! The drugs cost too much and if you want good doctors who do home visits, otherwise you know they do? They ask you over the phone "How do you feel? Where is the pain?" things like that and then they tell you to take some medicine and then in two or three days let me know. It happened to me, really, he did the consultation by phone! In the meantime you could die which is serious (n.74, 86 years);

- What irritates me is that in the square where I live there is a barrier that doesn't allow you to drive into the square. In the square there is no tobacconist, no pharmacy, the square has been destroyed. Before it had all that. Now there's nothing left.... Before all the farmers used to hang out in the square but now it's deserted. This would help me to live better (n. 19, 85 years);

- Cars always park near my house and I have a hard time getting out. Then traffic wardens are struggling to give fines. Then uneven paving stones hinder my path and I have to be careful or else I might fall (n. 20, 89 years);

- Loneliness is bad. (...) Now thank God I'm well I hope and with the grace of the Lord I hope to stay fit until the end of my life. However, there is always the fear of needing others. We decided to sell our homes. Buy a huge piece of land. And building houses close to each around a garden. Then with a large hall where you could meet and get together, eat together. But is this possible? We talk talk talk but it never gets done (n. 13, 80 years);

- I don't get around much because of the pain but it's just as well as the park here in front of my house that I always used to go to now has a post to stop scooters that I can't get past on my chair so I can't go there anymore (n. 90, 88 years);

- I cannot understand why the money the council has is spent on parties and stupid things. Maybe we even give money to them, but they do not think about giving job to girls who would help women like me maybe to clean the house, buy medicine and then you can have a chat so that even if I cannot get out, at least I'm with others (n. 91, 85 years).

d) The *resigned*, despite being much younger than the previous group, almost all focus on the need for higher pensions, higher levels of safety and cleanliness in the streets, and especially an undefined "need for company ". The few women who say they do not want anything more state this not out of a sense of satisfaction with their lot but more from a state of resignation and, perhaps, even an attempt to rationalize a state of things that they find hard to bear or live with and which they show no resistance to.

- My town should concentrate on security, first and foremost. More cleaning, especially for rubbish bins like those near my home and the tidiness of the

town. Maybe even a pedestrian area, not only for those of a certain age like me but also for children. I've proposed this idea so many times to those in charge, on Sunday for example, on the street of the convent, block it off so that the cars can't pass, and you can take a nice walk. And keep the cars parked on one side either the right or the left, the pavements are too narrow. And we older people cannot walk (n. 37, 72 years);

- What shall I ask for?! To spend more time with my children, to be with people who are also lonely (...) But how? I don't know anyone and I don't want to go out. Where should I go? I'm not a young girl who comes and goes with her friends on the street corner. I like to read and maybe I would go to college if it were nearby, or if there was a centre where I could find books to read and talk about. Eh, maybe this, a centre for meeting other people (n. 72, 77 years);

- I wish my city was safer so you could always go out without fear. I'm not racist but you watch the television and then you see all these black people and how can you not be afraid? It would take more police around maybe (n. 33, 75 years);

- I would like my children closer. Their work took them both to the north even the girls. And so I'm always alone. I know that nobody can do anything, but I would like to see them and talk to someone as since my husband died I'm always alone. Now my life is like that (n.57, 69 years);

- There's nothing that could improve my life... it's okay as it is! Enough! Now I've had my life and now it's up to my children. They are very busy, I see them a little, but I know this is right, that's how it goes (n. 27, 74 years).

In relation to this core theme the subjects showed a great variety of attitudes and corresponding levels of planning of the future. They ranged from some that showed a strong concern regarding their present and their future by making demands for more opportunities for socializing and practical means to do this but others appear to be entirely focused on a present that little satisfies them but yet who cannot think of any way of changing it. Correspondingly they not only don't propose any definite actions to change the "state of things" but they don't even dare to want this. Between these two extremes there are women who are exclusively concentrated on the needs of their families which they have taken on as their own and those whose age makes them feel stuck in a dead end street.

Concluding Remarks

The research conducted here has resulted in partly different conclusions from surveys carried out a few years ago on the older population of Puglia (Persichella 2008). Those investigations revealed that the female population in

particular suffered from a low level of education, they were frequently alone in their daily lives and that the lack of places and opportunities for them to socialise highlighted a worrying and risky situation for these women (Carrera 2008)⁸. The women interviewed for this research however, even within the limitations of any qualitative research, demonstrate a more active image of older women that often, even when they are alone, continue to look for opportunities to meet and get together, who organise their social life in accordance with their state of health and independence and who continue to have an active attitude towards the future and towards others. There are a few women who do volunteer work, looking after other elderly people in care homes and organising trips and events or at least would like to do so if those in charge of their places of residence would allow it and support their initiatives. Some of the interviewees show a clear ability to plan and work even though they are at a stage in their lives that is stereotypically associated with the label "old" and which is characterized by a progressive disengagement and a gradual closing in their world excluding all external social factors. Friedan wrote twenty years ago (1994) that the condition of being elderly is an "an age of invention" which was evident in the choices and ways of interacting with others that some of the interviewees showed.

Of course this kind of woman is not a true representation of the varied picture that emerged during the course of the interviews. Alongside these women who are still active and display high levels of planning and social participation and sometimes political interest, there are those whose character is still highly active but who are trapped within the home which has the consequence of isolating them from everything but internal family relationships and is difficult because of the paradoxically busy lives of their children, who often relegate them to the role of baby sitter. Their days are filled with the often frenetic activities of caring for grandchildren and sometimes even their children themselves whilst their evenings are empty and lonely.

⁸ The image of the greater social deprivation of women in general is made more dramatic by the fact they have, on average, lower incomes on average and are less qualified which both adversely affect the opportunities and ways of socializing. When these variables are combined with old age, the daily life of women is in danger of being reduced to a diet primarily consisting of television, church attendance, visits of relatives and the goodwill of neighbours and friends. The same image of attending the doctors surgery which is referred to as their most frequent activity for a high percentage of women, explains well the social vacuum that has been building over time around the women in our region, and how real the risk is of a strong and structured social isolation of women, especially those most vulnerable (Carrera 2008).

Then there are the women for whom it is the time of a domestic “closing in” which can be very painful and is weakened by the welfare choices which go beyond the mere need for “physical care” and move towards a more “holistic” approach. A type of “home help” was requested by many women, similar to domestic care assistants but who could come to their homes “just to talk”. This may seem to be a marginal requirement but for the daily lives of many of the interviewees it has a central role.

- I wish there was someone who could accompany me on a walk (n. 14, 99 years);
- I'd like someone to talk to. I'm fine and I don't need a nurse, but I'm always alone and maybe the council could send me someone for a few hours, just to talk a little (n. 90, 88 years).

Besides these types of women there are also those who are now resigned to “feeling alone” who have been given or who have given themselves the role of an old, tired, sad woman without any motivation or interest. They take care themselves listlessly and shun any opportunities to meet others or take part in any activities outside the home. These are the women whose children live far away or who do not visit them often. They are the true “elderly women” who, despite being in the younger age group (there was even a 65 year old woman in this profile) seem to be very weighed down by their condition. In most cases, the loss of a spouse and the scarcity of social relationships, which were often initiated by her husband, has been a barrier to their “recovery” after their loss. The absence of children has a huge influence on their gradual isolation. Some of the interviewees talk about their feelings of loneliness, not simply as a burden they must bear which has a negative effect on their lives but as a normal fact of life for senior citizens. The “natural” loneliness of old age, in their minds, is not something to be fought against but is merely an inevitable condition related to that phase of life in which “you can’t help being alone”. So there is a kind of initial renunciation of any attempt to construct or reconstruct a web of relationships.

The interviews clearly show how, paradoxically, age has a minor effect on the behaviour and lifestyles of these women which is confirmed by the members of the first and second groups, who apart from a significant number of “young elderly”, also includes very old women who demonstrate a surprising ability to organize their day by filling it with thousands of activities and many different commitments. On the other hand, in the third and fourth groups there are very “young” women. The words of these women reveal that the scarcity of external relationships may lead to isolation, loss of meaning in life and even of physical deterioration. What clearly emerges is that age and

independence end up having a lower impact on the quality of the everyday life of the interviewees in comparison with the presence of a strong network of family and friends and the opportunities that their town has to offer. The importance of this second factor is especially prominent in the face of a lack of the first which is a very widespread problem. It is not coincidence that virtually all the women in the second and third age groups (76-85 and 86 and over) who belong to the “active” and “housewife” categories live in areas which have many meeting places and opportunities to get together with others while the more “lonely” and “sad” who include some of the “young elderly” are aware that this absence of friendships is due to the lack of facilities in their town.

These observations confirm the expected results of a minor generational effect. The membership of certain age groups does not appear to have a direct impact on specific attitudes or patterns of daily life.

It is difficult, with this type of survey, to determine the importance of “qualifications”. Amongst the sample of interviewees higher educational qualifications (diplomas or even degrees) were associated with higher levels of sociability. However, it is reasonable to assume that there is not a simply direct link, but rather a more complex relationship that can refer both to knowledge gained and friendships initiated during the earlier stages of life and also the many opportunities offered by towns that are related to various training courses (eg the University of the Third Age, theatre courses,...) which obviously attract attention from those who have prior experience of these kinds of learning experiences. In some cases then, it is their past careers which prompt them to join these kinds of organisations (such as is the case for former teachers). We must tread carefully when discussing the relationship between educational levels and patterns of everyday life which is also confirmed by the fact that women with lower educational qualifications can have active daily routines if they live in a town which is rich in opportunities for creating relationships.

To reflecting therefore on the place of residence, it is clear that the size of the town is relevant in influencing the models of relationships. Small towns seem to still be able to protect against the risk of isolation thanks to the persistence of friendship networks and neighbourhoods very strong though they do not always provide adequate opportunities for “more structured” socialising.

- Now we don't see each other anymore. Now just the things we know about, we always say the same things, we talk about the pain, our children, but it's always the same people and eventually everyone just stays at home. Maybe you

meet each other at Mass and say a few words, but if not you just stay at home (n. 64, 71 years).

Cities and larger towns however, whilst on one hand are more prone to the risk of the loss of friendships because of the distances and the difficulties of older women in using public or private transport, are also able to offer more structured opportunities to socialise which can best be used when they are evenly spread between the centre and the suburbs.

- I didn't like living here very much in the beginning because I was born in a tiny town and before I was married I lived there. I had my friends there and my relatives. Here I had no one and I thought that I would always be alone. But my husband had got a job and so I came here tearfully. But now I'm grateful because there are a lot of things to do here. Maybe if I had stayed in my town I would be bored, here there are always so many things that you can do... courses, parties to organize, the Centre as well... and then if you are in pain, you say "I know I can't just stay here in bed" and then I get up, phone my friends and go out. If my friend who has a car can't drive, we call a gentleman who is retired and is a driver (n.19, 85 years).

Today it is increasingly true what Laslett observed (1992) more than twenty years ago: that the improvement of quality of life comes from remaining active for longer, even during a period in which work commitments and the activities connected to them have stopped. Of course, even the identity created by work which is a legacy of the Fordist industrial society, makes it so that in popular imagination the elderly are perceived as being closely related to the idea of disengagement (Facchini Rampazi 2006). A sort of withdrawal from active social life, as they have withdrawn from work coincides with the mental and physical deterioration of the subjects. But today, and certainly to an increasing extent in the near future, we must recognise the vast extremes hidden within this class of senior citizens.

In conclusion we have observed how being elderly is regarded as a challenge of identity which is influenced by both the quality of family relationships and friendships and also the quality of their towns. These are both factors in the construction of the general state of the elderly which can have an effect not just on their "moral" and "social" lives" but also on their general state of health. This means that the absence of a wide family and social network exposes them not only to existential risks but also to illness and disability. It is as if, paradoxically, the state of health becomes interdependent: you do not choose to take part in any activities because you are ill, but you're ill because you are not involved in any activity. These considerations reveal that, apart from the presence of family ties, and thus the personal gift of

socialising, the town is central in offering opportunities to meet and do activities. It is clear that in cases of individuals with poor relational networks, the role of local services in supporting the daily life of older people is paramount by providing them with structured opportunities to meet and engage with not only those who seek these chances but also others who do not even try and so places them in the centre of extended relational patterns.

The risk of self-exclusion which sometimes takes the form of a request for admission to residential facilities, are important policy choices implemented by local governments. Of course, as has also been shown by this investigation, we cannot forget the impact these decisions have on subjective factors but it would be a mistake to think that this excludes any kind of external social intervention. To take an extreme example, senior citizens with little or no functional independence come under the consideration of institutionalisation "if you take into account one or other of the two following mechanisms: a deterioration (objectively) of the network of strong ties and a mindset (subjectively) which is in favour of admission and auto-exclusion. The system of services offered by the area plays a key role"(Micheli 2003, 18).

This involves careful reflection then which shouldn't get caught up in the quagmire of formalism and can't fail to incorporate the knowledge that an area with facilities and infrastructure, the presence and quality of services and the accessibility of existing resources to the public are all factors that can create or deny opportunities to individuals.

It is a question of recognizing the opportunity for a public welfare intervention that integrates personal resources and social ties when present, or which fills the void if they don't exist. Loneliness and a lack of relations come with a high personal cost and also a real social one. We must consider both these factors when we underline the central role played by the facilities and activities available in an area as well as the support which can come from the so-called third sector. These subjects together are fundamental in building or at least safeguarding plans for the future and using their time in sensible ways and forms.

Above all we must provide for the enhancement or the rethinking of the urban environment, which would allow greater usability of this area. Apart from the removal of physical barriers that hinder mobility, ensuring that pavements are passable, improving the transport network and providing more accessible public transport, ensuring proper sanitation facilities which cover the whole region and when finances permit, providing simple or supplemented home help where appropriate. But it is also necessary to create the conditions for a social life which is rich in relationships by implementing activities and buildings which fully involve the older generation in the social life of their towns (and beyond if possible) and

enable them to find new ways to spend their time, to engage their energies, skills and resources in order to adapt to their new way of life. This project needs to be firmly linked to a representation of the older person as a bearer of resources and expertise rather than as in need of help and support. This would avoid the risk of aligning interventions and projects with a passive and reactive vision of the elderly which only serves to reinforce the image that they may have of themselves as weak and in need of help.

It is clear then that the third age should be viewed as a complex sometimes even contradictory phase in which personal resources, in terms of income, cultural and social awareness and physical independence mingle with the allocation of resources from a town. The increase in life expectancy requires more institutional attention including the rethinking of welfare measures to ensure a better chance of life and a renewed interest in the future which would create better opportunities for the social inclusion of elderly people.

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